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Propaganda, Fake News, and Media Lies: The Diabolical Business of Global Public Relations

http://projectcensored.org/propaganda-fake-news-media-lies/?mc_cid=615d33cd27&mc_eid=33a0fcb335

By Peter Phillips

3/15/2017

The expansion of public relations and propaganda (PRP) firms inside news systems in the world today has resulted in a deliberate form of news management. Maintenance of continuous news shows requires a constant and ever-entertaining supply of stimulating events and breaking news bites. Corporate media are increasingly dependent on various government agencies and PRP firms as sources of news.

The PRP industry has experienced phenomenal growth since 2001. In 2015, three publicly traded mega PR firms—Omnicom, WPP, and Interpublic Group—together employed 214,000 people across 170 countries, collecting \$35 billion in combined revenue. Not only do these firms control massive wealth, they also possess a network of connections in powerful international institutions with direct links to national governments, multi-national corporations, global policy-making bodies, and the corporate media.

In *The Practice of Public Relations*, Fraser P. Seitel defined *public relations* as “helping an organization and its public adapt mutually to each other.” Propaganda can be defined as the dissemination of ideas and information for the purpose of inducing or intensifying specific attitudes and actions. Both PR and propaganda seek to change behaviors and ideas among the masses in support of the agendas of public and private institutions. (For an early history of state propaganda, see Jacuie L’Etang, “State Propaganda and Bureaucratic Intelligence: The Creation of the Public Relations in 20th Century Britain,” *Public Relations Review* 24, no. 4 (1998): 413-41.) As Douglas Kellner and other researchers have documented, since 9/11 public relations firms have contributed to increased levels of media propaganda.

Consider the Rendon Group, one of the key PR firms supporting US propaganda efforts during recent wars. In the 1980s, it produced public relations propaganda for the ousting of Panama’s president, Manuel Noriega. The Rendon Group also shaped international support for the first Gulf War, and in the 1990s created the Iraqi National Congress. The Rendon Group provided the images that mobilized public support for a permanent war on terror, including the fake news stories of the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad, the heroic rescue of US Army private Jessica Lynch, and dramatic tales of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. As James Bamford reported in a 2005 article in *Rolling Stone*, Pentagon documents show thirty-five contracts with Rendon from 2000-2004, worth a total of between \$50-100 million dollars.

PRP firms have emerged as orchestrators of global informion and news. The world today faces a military-industrial-media empire, bolstered by PRP firms, that is so powerful and complex that truth is mostly absent or reported only in disconnected segments with little historical context. In late 1999, Ben Bagdikian, the author of *Media Monopoly* and former *Washington Post* editor, told me that he estimated that two-thirds of all news stories originated with PR firms; in 2003, an article from the *Guardian* conservatively estimated that 50-80% of news and business stories originated from public relations firms. The result is managed news by governments, corporations, and PRP firms—often interlocked—including both the release of specific stories intended to build public support as well as the deliberate non-coverage of news stories that may undermine capitalist elites’ goals and interests.

PRP firms provide a variety of services to major corporations and institutions around the world. Brand enhancement and sales are undoubtedly among their key services. However, companies offer much more, including research and crisis management for corporations and governments, public information campaigns, web design and promotions, and corporate media placement. WPP’s Hill & Knowlton proudly brags on its website that they service 50% of the Fortune Global 500 companies from their offices in forty countries. Along with Omnicom’s Fleishman and Hillard, Hill & Knowlton have been the key PRP firms working with Monsanto to protect its brand Roundup, which contains the herbicide glyphosate. Roundup is the most widely-used herbicide in the world, being sold in over 130 countries, but the World Health Organization recently declared glyphosate a human carcinogen. As countries begin to restrict its use, PRP firms gear up to protect Monsanto’s profits.

WPP’s Hill & Knowlton is also well known for its early involvement with the Council for Tobacco Research (CTR), originally established in 1954 to counter the 1952 *Reader’s Digest* report linking cancer to tobacco smoking. In 1993, the *Wall Street Journal* described CTR as the “longest-running misinformation campaigns in U.S. business history” (A.M. Freedman and L.P. Cohen, “Smoke and Mirrors: How Cigarette Makers Keep Health Questions ‘Open’ Year after Year,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 1993.)

It was WPP's Burson-Marsteller who created the frontgroup Global Climate Coalition (GCC). From 1989-2001, the GCC helped the oil and auto industries downplay the dangers of global warming. Initial members of the coalition included Amoco, American Petroleum Institute, Chevron, Chrysler, Exxon, Ford, GM, Shell, and Texaco. In addition from 2007-2015 the US federal government spent over \$4 billion dollars for PRP services. The US employs 3,092 public relations officers in 139 agencies. An additional \$2.2 billion goes to outside firms to perform PRP, polling, research, and market consulting. The world's top PRP firms reaped millions of US dollars in 2014 including Laughlin, Marinaccio & Owens (\$87.98M), WPP-Young & Rubicam Inc. (\$57.5M), WPP-Ogilvy Public Relations (\$47.93M), Omnicom-FleishmanHillard (\$42.4M), and Gallup (\$42.0M). WPP's Burson-Marsteller won a \$4.6 million contract with the US Department of Homeland Security in 2005 to develop public awareness and education for a major emergency, disaster, or terrorist attack in Washington DC. Before the first Gulf War, a fake news propaganda spectacle took place courtesy of WPP's Hill & Knowlton. They were hired by Citizens for a Free Kuwait and eventually received nearly \$10.8 million to conduct one of the most effective public relations campaigns in history. Hill & Knowlton helped create a national outrage against Iraq by publicizing the horrifying events supposedly caused by Iraqi soldiers during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In testimony to the House of Representative's Human Rights Caucus, a young woman named Nayirah said that she saw "Iraqi soldiers come into the [Kuwaiti] hospital with guns, and go into the room where 15 babies were in incubators. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators, and left the babies on the cold floor to die." What the public was not told was that Nayirah was the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the US, and that her performance was coordinated by the White House and choreographed by the US public relations firm Hill & Knowlton on behalf of the Kuwaiti government.

As Johan Carlisle reported, former CIA official Robert T. Crowley, who served as a liaison between the agency and PR firms, acknowledged that "Hill & Knowlton's overseas offices...were perfect 'cover' for the ever-expanding CIA. Unlike other cover jobs, being a public relations specialist did not require technical training for CIA officers." Furthermore, Crowley admitted, the CIA used its Hill & Knowlton connections to "put out press releases and make media contacts to further its positions... Hill & Knowlton employees at the small Washington office and elsewhere distributed this material through CIA assets working in the United States news media."

A global war on terrorism requires continuous ideological justification, aimed at the mass of people who instinctively favor peace. PRP firms provide an on-going rationalization for war by servicing government propaganda activities, military contractors, pro-war Hollywood films, and the marketing of war toys, cartoons and related products. The techniques for marketing brands are essentially the same as for marketing war. PRP firms produce creative, visually-stimulating, emotional ads that spotlight families with loving children in danger of others, protected by official authorities, including homeland security, police or military personnel: "To get to you...they'd have to get past us," touted the narrator of "America's Navy—the Shield," produced by the advertising firm Campbell Ewald, which first aired on CBS during the 2014 Army-Navy football game. In May 2015, the *Navy Times* reported that the Navy had awarded its Recruiting Command contract—"initially valued at \$84.4 million for a one-year fixed-price"—to New York-based Young & Rubicam.

The big three global PRP firms are key contributors to the global hegemony of capitalism. PRP firms and their corporate media partners aid corporations, governments, and non-governmental

organizations in an unrelenting ideological assault on, and pacification of the minds of the masses around the world. The overall message is the continued acquisition of material products and consumption, expanded desire for a life of luxury, fear of others—including terrorists, criminals, and threatening peoples—the support of police states, acceptance of a permanent war on terrorism, and the equation of private corporations with democratic governance. This is what Noam Chomsky called engineering opinion and parading enemies (*Media Control*, Seven Stories Press, 2002).

The PRP industry is highly concentrated and fully global. With \$35 billion in annual revenue, the big three PRP firms are key components of the transnational capitalist class. The PRP industry's primary goal is the promotion of capital growth through hegemonic psychological control of human desires, emotions, beliefs, and values. PRP firms do this by manipulating the thoughts and feelings of human beings worldwide. In many ways PRP firms are the ideological engine of capitalism, due to both their massive influence in world corporate media and their increasing embedded role in the propaganda of national governments, including psychological operations in support of a permanent war on terror.

Perhaps democracy movements can offer us some hope for the future. Consciousness of the dark side of PRP and its unrestricted power to warp minds is an important first step. Among some recent positive steps taken by activists to limit the power of PRP, Quebec has become one of the first regions to ban commercial advertising targeting children under the age of 13. For that matter, three generations of people in Cuba have grown up without product advertising in their lives. A group of graduate students from the University of Havana simply laughed when I asked them five years ago if they ever wanted a "Happy Meal." It seemed absurd to them to even consider the idea. We too need to understand the absurdity of the PRP industry, and to move to eliminate its influence from our lives, our cultures, and our world.