

Review Essay: Secrecy, Visibility and Corporate Influence

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Sue Jansen (2017) *Stealth communications: The spectacular rise of public relations*. Cambridge: Polity.

Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell (2015) *A Quiet Word: Lobbying, crony capitalism and broken politics in Britain*.
London: Vintage.

Susan George (2015) *Shadow Sovereigns: How global corporations are seizing power*. Cambridge: Polity.

Critical political economies of communication have developed settled categories of analysis. Communication related institutions, professions, infrastructures, networks, architectures, policy frameworks and representations are evaluated against the exercise of state and capitalist power. Theoretical debates unfold as standpoints of critique and political action are established. Such intellectual activity is often technology- or media-centric. Most researchers link one or more of the preceding analytical categories to certain aspects of broadcasting, print, film, telecommunications, computing, the internet or social media.

A more oblique approach to media practices and technologies provides distinctive insights about their operations. Sue Jansen's critique of the public relations industry, for example, doubles as a critique of how mediated public spheres can distort their own principles (from a perspective beyond those that focus on journalism, news or media policy). As the title of her book implies, public relations (PR) works by stealth to mediate media domains and representations.

It inserts itself between the event and the report of the event, compromising or displacing the roles of reporters and editors by controlling the flow of information through press releases, strategic uses of language, promotional campaigns, third party endorsement and other techniques. In effect, *it seeks to censor information at its source*, and thereby dilute, pollute or deform the free flow of information upon which classic theories of democracy depend (p. 3, italics in original).

Here, Jansen focuses upon the use of “manipulative publicity” (p. 3) within corporate public relations, international conflicts, anti-environmentalist campaigns and the conduct of public diplomacy by private contractors. Within this general framework, PR overlaps with lobbying and the marketing of ideas via ‘third parties’ such as partisan think tanks and corporate-backed front groups.

Available evidence proves beyond doubt that PR does indeed shape news content and journalistic communication. Jansen cites a 2008 Cardiff University study of Britain's most prestigious national newspapers which found that only 12 percent of published stories were based on material gathered by reporters themselves. According to a 2009 study of 12,000 US editors and journalists, 94 percent said that they regularly used PR submissions. An independent 2010 study of the BBC's science coverage revealed a strong correlation between science stories and PR activity. The recent contraction of print and broadcast journalism in Western countries reinforces the asymmetrical relationship between PR and the media. Meanwhile, the internet allows PR practitioners to bypass media gatekeepers and to operate anonymously through the deceptive use of online identities.

The media-PR relationship is central to modern political economies of capitalism and communication. Such became apparent in the United States when the birth of the modern corporation challenged the principles of constitutional independence, representative democracy and collective self-determination among workers. As Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson openly criticised the manipulative power of banks along with the corporate owners of mining, railroad, oil, steel, manufacturing and retail businesses, journalists and other writers exposed social injustices and corrupt corporate practices. This, in turn, galvanised the emergent Progressive and Settlement movements, which further delegitimised the excesses of corporate power. Once the likes of J P Morgan, Standard Oil, the Rockefellers, Du Pont and the Vanderbilts started hiring publicists to counter political and media scrutiny, their need for organised public relations became obvious. The Publicity Bureau, founded in 1904, ran propaganda campaigns for railroad companies and other business interests. They pioneered the technique of pretending to be an impartial interlocutor rather than the representative of a wealthy client with vested interests. Subsequently, Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays openly declared what Jansen calls "their own ingenuous efforts to save rhetorically challenged capitalists from themselves" (p. 45). She notes that Lee's mantra of 'truth and candour' was belied by his own PR activities on behalf of the Rockefellers, part owners of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company. In an attempt to break a miners' strike at Ludlow, they employed National Guardsmen who lit fires which killed mineworkers and their families. Lee claimed that the fires started accidentally and profiled John Rockefeller as a man of humanity instead of a wealthy scion whose profits depended upon suppressed wages and violent strike breaking. Bernays candidly described PR as a set of propaganda techniques that might be used for good or ill. For Jansen, this formulation implies that the ends justifies the means, and that the means are essentially neutral (rather than anti-ethical to democratic processes).

For political economists of communication, the sub-title of Jansen's book can be posed as a question. What explains the spectacular rise of public relations? Throughout the 20th century, PR followed the geo-political expansion of American imperialism and the associated export of a corporate communications culture. From about 1980, the proliferation of neoliberal policy agendas, the demise of the Soviet bloc, and the convergence of communication industries and infrastructures extended transnational formations of corporate power. In this unfolding global environment, the PR industry became dominated by a top-tier of conglomerates originating from the United States, United Kingdom, China, France, Germany and Japan. The Omnicom Group, WPP, Edelman, MSL Group, Blue Focus and other major players house multiple subsidiary operations. Put simply, the globalisation of PR mirrors the globalisation of media corporations and advertising agencies. New, lucrative opportunities for manipulative PR have grown accordingly. They include the promotion of unpopular, neoliberal policies such as tax cuts for the wealthy and the privatisation of public assets, consultancy services for autocratic regimes worldwide, and the defence of food and beverage

corporations whose profits depend upon the excessive consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and sugar-based products. Even amidst the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession, PR profited from the negative perceptions of banks and real estate firms by selling them the specialist services of crisis communication and reputation management.

In one sense, the very opacity and ubiquity of contemporary PR eludes academic definition. The panoply of manipulative tactics available to corporations, for example, ranges across interpersonal persuasion, subterfuge, unstated bribery, surveillance and legal intimidation. In this context, Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell's *A Quiet Word* allows us to understand the synergies of PR and lobbying; each is a manifestation of the other depending on circumstances. The authors are directors of Spinwatch, a monitoring group opposed to corporate PR and government spin doctoring. Their book explains how, in British politics, corporate lobbyists seek to position the government, legislature and senior civil service as facilitators of corporate business opportunity. Routine processes of lobbying must thereby control the intellectual space in which officials and senior politicians make policy decisions. To do so effectively also requires the delimitation of oppositional rhetorical influences from independently minded MPs, activist networks and recalcitrant community groups. In a series of chapters, Cave and Rowell categorise the full array of lobbying strategies with illustrative stories and testimonies. The major categories are: insider access to cabinet ministers and senior public servants; media manipulation, say, to build positive or negative perceptions about impending legislation; deceptive use of third parties to veil corporate endangerment of public and environmental health; manipulative public consultation to give the impressions of community involvement in major development projects; the neutralisation of anti-corporate groups mobilising prejudice against them and inserting infiltrators and the reframing of un-mandated privatisations of health and education as exemplars of reform.

The standard defense of such practices is that they are open to all. In a democracy, anyone can lobby – unions, community groups, environmentalists, feminists, religious forums and the representatives of business. Cave and Rowell argue in response that money and influence among lobbyists are unevenly distributed. They cite the case of Portland, which has employed former spin doctors for Tony Blair including Alistair Campbell. It has sold lobbying services to Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Nestlé, Tesco, Apple, Google, Vodafone, Cable and Wireless, six energy businesses, four financial companies, three professional services firms, and Britain's largest defence company, BAE. This combination of political insider expertise and large financial resources swamps the democratic capabilities of civil society and the political system itself. Among Portland's clients, financial interests are especially powerful. Cave and Rowell describe the banking sector as a "fearsome and influential player in British politics" and observe that "there has been no coherent body to counter it, either before or since the financial crisis" (p. 13).

From a critical political economy perspective, *Stealth Communication* and *A Quiet Word* fail to conceptualise the structural inter-relationships between state and capital. One must acknowledge that state formations operate at a national and supranational level and that they are riven by the contradictory pressures of capital accumulation and democratic legitimacy. Equally, Jansen, Cave and Rowell do not fully analyse the economic and political ramifications of transnational corporate power. A global appreciation of political-economic totalities allows for a deeper critical understanding of public relations and lobbying.

Such a critique is encapsulated in the title and sub-title of Susan George's *Shadow sovereigns: How global corporations are seizing power*. As author of 12 plus books on global issues, and as a longstanding scholar-activist for the Transnational Institute, she exudes ethical gravitas. Accordingly,

she identifies, powerfully, the historicity and significance of global corporate influence. Such is evident in the following extracts:

Since the onset of neoliberal politics at the beginning of the 1980s, which accelerated at the end of the Cold War in 1991 when the Soviet Union disappeared, the number of TNCs has soared. Globalisation has given wings to the giant corporations and helped them to create their own meta-organisations to deal with particular world spheres, such as trade and the environment (p. 3).

We are confronted by a battle between two models of thought and behaviour. Now we have reached the point where we must choose between the Enlightenment heritage developed since the eighteenth century, on the one hand, and, on the other, what I see as the great neoliberal regression.

George shows that TNCs are more than powerful lobbyists and manipulators of media. They are working proactively to construct a pseudo-legitimacy through supranational institutions, such as the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the Trilateral Commission (TC), the Bilderberg Group, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBSCD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF). From this general framework, George delineates three anti-democratic global initiatives. These are supra-national trading arrangements built around the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), TNC partnerships with United Nation institutions and think tanks, along with an overarching WEF sponsored Global Redesign Initiative (GRI) comprised of 46 Global Agenda Councils (GACs).

One might conclude that TNCs are unassailable and that anti-corporate opposition networks are entirely impotent. There are, however, important counter-trends which are not easy to prevent. Firstly, the need for invisible PR and lobbying is undermined by the parallel requirement of favourable brand publicity. The publication of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (1999) signified and abetted the proliferation of anti-brand activism on behalf of workforces sub-contracted to produce cars, fashion garments, shoes and mobile devices. Secondly, PR firms and lobbyists cannot second guess the results of economic uncertainty and political volatility. The emergence of anti-austerity movement parties in South America, southern Europe and the United Kingdom has reshaped political landscapes and created new problems for transnational corporate interests. And, occasionally, and unexpectedly, iconic images arise as metaphors of capitalist inhumanity.

At the time of writing, the blackened visage of London's Grenfell Tower fulfils that role. The transparently obvious results of building code deregulation and neoliberal policies in general cannot be easily ignored, or spun to corporate advantage.