

Media training: It's time journalists got even

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Abstract

Journalists tend to get angry when they discover that there is an industry dedicated to minimising their capacity to get free flowing information from the people they interview. They are surprised and dismayed by the extent of media training and by the tactics trainees are taught in order to "retain control" during interviews.

This paper asserts that journalists shouldn't just get angry. They should get even. It argues that journalism educators have an important role in preparing reporters to deal with media-trained talent. It discusses the prevalence of media training—who is providing it and who is receiving it—and exposes some of the more dubious tricks of the trade. Also, it begins the discussion about the ways journalists can respond.

Introduction

I have conducted media training. I have also co-written and delivered courses which aim to raise awareness about media training for journalists working in industry. I disclose this because my own experience motivates and informs this paper. My approach, which could be described as observational and participatory, is not inappropriate because there appears to be a dearth of literature on the subject, underlining one of this paper's central points: that the media training industry is under recognised. The premise of this paper is that the media training industry is powerful and pervasive but also poorly understood and widely under estimated. It requires further study.

I have opted in most cases not to name media training businesses or individuals, unless those entities have themselves made their views public. It is more useful to discuss the practices of the industry as a whole. Naming some, and not others, only reflects my experience and prejudice, without adding much to the debate. There is no known database which accurately records either media trainers and/or their clients. On-line sources, such as *Crikey's* list of "Journalists to PR Agencies" (Mayne, 2005) and the *Source Watch* website (Source Watch, 2010), have begun the process of tracking journalists who move into the broad field of public relations. A more comprehensive list charting the flow of personnel from journalism to media training would be useful. I suspect such a list would reveal that a significant number of journalists turn to media training as an alternative income, either voluntarily at mid-career level or by necessity after media company restructures.

What is media training? Who are the media trainers?

Media training is the process of instructing people about how to deal with the media. It most often occurs informally and within organisations or corporations, and often in preparation for specific media appearances. The media training industry, which this paper relates to, provides a wide range of courses for a wide range of clients. These courses can be general or specific, depending on the needs of a client. Often media training companies encourage participants to graduate through the courses they offer, covering basic and advanced interview skills, as well as others, such as “crisis media management” and “media message development”.

The websites of media training companies reveal that the people conducting media training are predominantly former journalists and public relations professionals. Websites boast the awards won by ex-journalists and their years of service in the kinds of media outlets the media training companies’ clients are trying to reach. Media training companies prize trainers who have recently left the media, presumably because they bring fresh experience and up-to-date insights about the news values of their former workplace, as well as intelligence on the people still there. Trainers with business exposure are considered especially valuable, as are people who have both electronic media and broadsheet print experience.

If the ranks of the media training industry are indeed swollen with ex-journalists, it poses an interesting question about whether they are complicit in this process or whether they serve to ameliorate some of the industry’s more unsavoury practices. I suspect the modernising of some training approaches can be attributed to ex-journalists, while, in other cases, reporters simply switch over to “the dark side” and abandon much of the ethical framework they have hitherto worked within. Again, these are questions for further research.

Media training sessions are conducted on a one-on-one basis or in small groups of up to four or five participants. These sessions combine a theoretical component, based on a loose syllabus, and practical exercises, in which participants experience simulated real life interviews in radio, television and, to a lesser degree, print environments. Courses are expensive, ranging in price from approximately \$1,000 to \$10,000 per day—depending on whether the client is a for-profit or non-profit organisation and whether the session is conducted in a professional studio.

Who is getting trained?

Big corporations, sitting on potential bad news, are not the only organisations to engage media trainers. If an entity has a reputation and money to protect it, it is a likely candidate. Clients are diverse and include individuals, local councils, non-government organisations, industry groups, government departments, sporting clubs and churches, as well as businesses, both large and small. There is no known research which tests the extent of media training across government departments or councils. Information about the extent of media training of private companies or non-government organisations is also unknown.

The literature

Literature on public relations fits broadly into two categories. The first could be defined as “how to” books aimed at people seeking to harness the media for a public relations

cause. The second, much smaller, category covers texts or volumes of academic papers, which critically analyse the public relations industry for either a general or academic audience. Surprisingly, neither category deals with the topic of media training in depth.

For example, Bob Burton's excellent *Inside spin*, which explores the inner workings of a great many public relations campaigns, does not address the issue (Burton, 2007). Gwyneth Howell's explanation of James Hardie Industries' attempts to hoodwink the media does not canvas the importance of media training to the campaign's initial success and ultimate failure (Sheehan & Xavier, 2009). The weighty *Australian and New Zealand public relations manual*, which is endorsed by the Public Relations Institutes of both countries, does not deal with media training (Tymson & Lazar, 2006).

In the how-to-do-public-relations category, analysis of media training is also absent. Jim Macnamara's *Public relations handbook* does mention media training, but only to endorse it fulsomely. He claims: "it is highly recommended that you or your spokespersons undertake specialist media interview training if you are facing the media" (Macnamara, 2000, p. 123).

Grahame Dowling's *Creating corporate reputations* advocates "media presentation training" for company spokespeople in crisis situations (Dowling, 2001, p. 265). He guides readers through a formula for dealing with a media crisis and offers advice similar to that given by many media trainers but his emphasis is on showing how corporations can control the agenda, not on questioning the appropriateness of such training. Nick Renton recommends media training for people "without a natural flair for public speaking or lacking in the ability to deal with unexpected or possibly hostile questions" (Renton, 2004, p. 72).

Media training can be a good thing

Journalists generally have an interest in people overcoming their fears about the media. People who are terrified about the media are less likely to agree to cooperate or to be involved in interviews. Conversely, people who feel confident that they can maintain control during an interview are more likely to agree to being questioned.

At its best, media training can be a positive thing, by which I mean it can assist the free flow of information and the search for the truth by encouraging people to overcome fears about the media and consequently agreeing to cooperate with a reporter. Media training usually encourages people to engage with the media and tell their story through it. It demonstrates that hiding from the media long-term is a flawed media strategy.

Everyone is entitled to some understanding of the way the media works. Media training can be a positive thing when it demystifies what the media does and explains the role of journalists. In doing this, clients may even appreciate that inaccuracies, beat-ups and unfair coverage can be countered to some extent by developing media relationships. They might come to understand that media outrage may just be confected and that going off-the-record can be beneficial, when they define what they mean by the term and come to trust the reporter concerned. They may see that if they do not tell their story clearly they risk the reporter telling it for them—or not telling it at all. They may learn not to take things personally when the media appears to be turning on them and that visual language usually works best, regardless of the medium. Interviews are often improved when the interviewee is able to create colourful quotes and has an understanding of various practical matters, such as how a microphone works or

whether to face a reporter or the camera when being interviewed. These are all skills taught by media trainers.

However, it should be noted that some of what forms the syllabus of media training sessions can be found in standard textbooks or how-to-guides, which are cheaply available (Frangi & Fletcher, 2002). So it should not be argued that the media training industry is solely responsible for the creation of more aware media performers.

Media training can be a bad thing

Media training is a bad thing when it limits the free flow of information and the search for the truth. It is self evident that the media and journalists play an important role in a functioning civil society. Among its guiding principles, the news media is meant to “animate democracy” and have “respect for truth”, although, as we know, it often fails on both counts. The journalists’ code of ethics encourages truthfulness, fairness, accuracy and disclosure (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 1996), suggesting these ideals are valued because they contribute to the betterment of a civil society. Likewise, social responsibility theory, which governments and many corporations at least nominally subscribe to, urges, at a minimum, behaviour that does no harm. Notions of transparency, corporate civility and accountability are woven into the business mission statements of companies that routinely engage media trainers. However, the lessons of media training can be at odds with these ideals.

Sometimes the lessons of media training are antithetical to openness and accountability. These lessons can also be contrary to the interests of the media-trained clients. One example is the advice given to clients to lie in order to buy time, or to avoid talking, when a journalist makes initial contact. Participants are routinely told to “tell the reporter you’re just going to a meeting”. While this may prevent the interviewee being trapped by the reporter and will give the interviewee time to think about their response, it also means the interviewee’s first encounter is based on dishonesty. One media training company is so open about this advice that it repeats it on its website.

Imagine your phone rings and a senior journalist from a leading media outlet is on the other end wanting “a chat”, in effect, to interview you. What should you do? Tell a “white lie”. Let me explain. (Roberts, 2008)

This is further explained like this:

Taking time to prepare for a media interview is essential. If it means telling a “white lie”, by saying you are in a meeting to buy time to get your head around your key points and prepare properly, then do it. It’s right because the points you end up making in the interview will be well thought out; it’s right for the company because their spokesperson will be prepared, and; it’s right for the journalist, who will appreciate your well-thought out answers. (Roberts 2008)

This is bad advice, not only because it encourages potential interviewees to form dishonest relationships with reporters, but also because interviewees should be told that they can still buy time while being honest. There is no harm in telling a reporter “I would like five minutes to gather my thoughts”. Almost all reporters would understand, so long as they are confident that in five minutes time the interviewee will talk to them. Likewise, it is bad advice to hide behind fictitious meetings to avoid contact all together. Trainees should be shown that journalists will generally respect people more when they tell them why they are not able—or do not want—to talk to them.

Margo Mateas at the Public Relations Training Company in San Jose, California, advocates another form of excuse in order to buy time during an interview if things are going awry.

If the interview goes off track, stop it. You can ask for a break, a glass of water, a visit to the restroom. It doesn't matter if the excuse seems lame—they will use footage of you on-camera, not off. (Krotz, 2009)

Journalists have become used to these excuses and many probably expect this sort of deception. But resignation can become anger when reporters appreciate that the deception is formularised and that, at its core, it is often about avoiding scrutiny.

One phrase used by some media trainers is “the interview is not the place for an original idea”. This is meant to discourage trainees from becoming too creative in their use of language and launching into long-winded analogies that have not been properly considered beforehand. It is meant to protect interviewees from the embarrassment of a mixed metaphor or oxymoron. However this advice also serves to stifle the very spontaneity, colour and humanity that audiences respond to. Others argue that interviewees should never “wing it” and should thoroughly rehearse sound bites or grabs before a reporter arrives. The risk here is that interviewees become rigid and their sound bites contrived and lifeless.

This is similar to advice given by Ralf Leinemann and Elena Baikalseva, who, in their *Quick guide for interviews*, say “Don't debate, defend, discuss”. Later they advocate “Do not argue based on opinions, stay facts based”. This too reads like a recipe for dull, anodyne and risk-averse interviews.

Many media training companies advise clients to assume that they are always “on-the-record” and to never go “off-the-record” (Leinemann & Baikalseva, 2006, pp. 134-137). This is also bad advice in many instances. It is true that there are risks for clients because of the widespread confusion about the difference between going off-the-record and other forms of in-confidence discussions such as “background briefings” (Walker, 1996, p. 52). But it is equally true that there are benefits for interviewees, the media and the public as a consequence of off-the-record reporting.

Rather than blanket advice that going off-the-record is wrong, a more nuanced approach would better serve everyone's interests. Media trainers should explain the difference between the various forms of in-confidence discussions and advise clients to choose the form they want, so long as they trust the reporter concerned and clearly define the meaning of whatever terms they use.

Another bad piece of advice given to media trainees is to repeat a key message over and over again in the belief that only then will it resonate with either the audience directly or, in the case of pre-recorded interviews, with the journalist or producer who is making decisions about what to edit. Some media trainers play tapes of politicians repeating the same message several times and argue that these examples prove the power of repetition.

However, this advice does not take into account that many audiences, and clients, despise the manner by which politicians as a class communicate. Politicians have a tendency to disregard the question they are asked in order to focus on their message. Consequently, they repeat key messages, often in an overly oppositional or self-justificatory way.

Nobody wins by this advice. The audience is robbed of meaningful conversation, the journalist's capacity to discover new information is reduced and the trainee can end up sounding like the kind of person that audiences do not like.

A lesson given by some media trainers is known as the "Twenty/Eighty rule". I ask journalists what they think this is. Some say it has to do with the ratio between an interviewee's use of fact and opinion. Others believe it is about the different weighting that should be given to the key message and a case study or example.

It is actually a formula, whereby interviewees spend the first fifth of their answer dealing with the question and the remainder talking about their own message. This is achieved when the interviewee sounds like they have answered the question and the journalist becomes compliant, effectively allowing the interviewee to switch the subject.

This switch is achieved by the use of a "bridging phrase" or "transitional phrase". These phrases are encouraged in many forms of marketing communication, including starting and ending sales pitches and buying time to allow ideas to form while in conversation. In media training, bridging phrases are used for one reason—to change a subject, usually away from an area that the interviewee considers irrelevant or trifling or difficult to another which he finds more comfortable or suitable.

Some media training companies talk about the need to use these phrases when interviewers digress from the interviewee's agenda or when he or she becomes confrontational or aggressive. Examples of bridging phrases include: "Having said that, let me say . . .", "But the larger issue here is . . ." or "Before I get to that, let me tell you about . . ."

The tactic of bridging is becoming more sophisticated. Outright evasion is generally discouraged because it tends to draw attention to the fact that the interviewee is uncomfortable with the subject. Two decades ago another tactic emerged, which is summed up by this piece of advice:

The trick is to restructure a question before answering and in so doing remove the worst dangers. You pull off this trick by volunteering additional information, or different information, beyond what the original question posed. (Hailstone, 1990, p. 80)

Although this is not outright evasion, it is nevertheless a recipe for manipulation, and reflects its author's view that "No question is sacred. None have to be answered slavishly". Thankfully, this sentiment is less prevalent among media trainers today. But even those trainers who have some interest in serving the public interest wrestle with the challenge of protecting their clients from unwanted and intrusive questions. On the one hand, they acknowledge that evasion and manipulation are counter-productive. But on the other, they know that full and frank disclosure is at best unhelpful and at worst extremely damaging.

Nowadays, some media coaches instruct trainees to "satisfy" the reporter so that he or she at least feels that the question has been answered. But this too can be manipulative. It can become an art form—a black art—to beguile an interviewer and audience into believing that the question has actually been dealt with, so that they become supplicant, allowing the topic to be changed to something more benign.

The twenty–eighty rule is a variation of the "ten–thirty rule" (Macnamara, 1996, p. 51), in which the first 10 seconds of an answer should be spent addressing the question and the last 30 seconds on delivering what Macnamara calls the "must says", or the

interviewee's key messages. He advocates the use of "linking phrases" to make the transition from the actual answer to the key message. He also stresses the times are not set in stone. In other words, not all answers need to be 40 seconds long.

If you contend that being interviewed carries a responsibility to answer questions as fully as possible, then the advice given by some media trainers is offensive. It is appropriate to show trainees that they have the right to refuse to answer a question. But, it would be sound advice to stress that it is effective to give a plausible and honest reason for refusing to do so, not run away from the question by changing the subject.

Likewise, it would be sound advice to illustrate that interviewees usually get opportunities to make their case, without cynically changing the subject to suit their own ends. This often comes as a direct result of answering the questions they have been asked. In any case, trainees should be reminded that questions theoretically reflect what the audience wants to know and therefore it is courteous to answer them properly.

Media training has evolved. For example, crisis media management, which is an important and specific subset of media training, now reflects the widely held view that companies should face up to, rather than hide from, crises. There is now a large body of evidence (Hearit, 2004) supporting the view that companies should apologise for wrong doing—and for the perception of wrong doing—in order to lessen reputation damage.

Public relations practitioner, Peter Lewis, says we are entering a new era, in which many of the old assumptions of corporate communication are being challenged:

We are entering the post-spin era, where the trick is to actually be authentic and open up real conversations, genuine debates and encourage genuine not staged engagement. (Lewis, 2010)

Although a trick cannot conjure authenticity, Lewis's point is well made. It is lost, however, on most media trainers who have been slow to recognise that the public demands more truthfulness from interviewees and is switched on to devices like repetition and reductive sound bites. The public is also awakening to bridging phrases and other forms of avoidance such as the "twenty-eighty" rule.

What should journalists—and journalism educators—do about media training?

If journalists are ever going to "get even", they should first become aware of the breadth of media training and of its tactics. With the assistance of journalism educators, students and aspiring reporters can achieve a better understanding of interviews and the effects of media training.

Reporters should assume that interviewees have been trained and that interviewees have spent long sessions preparing for the interview they are conducting. They should listen for repetition and key messages, understanding that these are the essential building blocks used by the interviewee to communicate their message. They should be attuned to deflection techniques, such as bridging phrases and the "twenty-eighty" rule, and use them as signposts towards the topics the interviewee is seeking to avoid. They should not be beguiled by efforts to satisfy them that their question has been answered when in fact many aspects of their enquiry remain unresolved. They should pursue topics vigorously, but politely, until they are truly satisfied that they are getting meaningful responses. They should not be concerned about bringing the interviewee

back to the core question, even if a bridging phrase has taken them off onto another topic.

Journalists should survey websites of media training companies. Many actually include testimonials by clients, providing valuable clues about the sorts of messages they can expect to hear from the people they interview. They should read the transcripts of interviews so that they better appreciate the ways in which media-trained interviewees build their messages. They can ask them to state upfront what their key message is so the audience is more aware of both the reporter and the interviewee's agenda. They could point out when the interviewee has used a bridging phrase and ask why they are seeking to move away from the question they have been asked. They could ask the interviewee whether they have received media training.

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