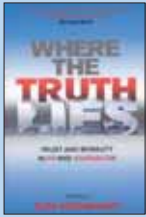


News and morality – who gets it right?



Julia Hobsbawm
Where the Truth lies

Julia Hobsbawm has made her career in the narrow gap between journalism and PR.

For this book, she selected an impressive range of authors, with media, politics and higher education experience, to contribute essays about what people read, see and hear. What is truthful? What is spin? What do people believe? Who do people trust?

The contributors, many with strong political agendas, were free to state their own diverse views. Some, like Peter Osborne of *The Spectator*, take the line that journalists are honest investigators, whose duty is to expose the truth behind what PR people tell them. Others like Anne Gregory, Centre for Public Relations Studies director at Leeds Metropolitan University, suggest most journalists are so constrained by editors' demands for quick, entertaining stories that truth is low in

their agenda, while PR people consider clients' long-term interests and must build a good reputation for them.

Many contributors start with a historical view of the relationship between the two professions. Journalists used to regard PR people as second-raters, those who hadn't made the grade in Fleet Street, reducing them to scrounging editorial space for employers, often by bribing journalists with freebies.

Nowadays the balance has changed. Newspaper readership is falling, budgets for investigative reporting are limited, and space to fill is expanding. Television, Internet and air time is increasing. Opinion, gossip and features have more prominence than serious news. Journalists now need PR people to provide information as much as PR people need journalists to use the information they provide.

Government and corporate communications specialists have more clout than most media workers. The best and brightest graduates now prefer to work in PR than for media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

Most essayists feel that good can come out of the present situation. The contribu-

tion of John Lloyd, of the *Financial Times*, is impartial and provides good arguments. Ms Hobsbawm's own essay suggests ways of bridging the gap, to ensure practitioners see each other as allies, and acknowledge consumers growing sophistication and cynicism. These suggestions include the media acknowledging sources for stories, better professional education, and even a new regulatory authority.

For all Hobsbawm's even-handedness in selecting writers, this book has a journalistic quality, not in content but in style – crisp, entertaining and presenting good arguments – nothing too deep. For those with little experience of the modern industry, it is illuminating. The question is: will it change the mindset and behaviour of practitioners so that once again people can say “it must be true, I read it in the paper?” ■



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Inside out

Are we wasting our time?

Research suggests that official internal communications do not matter much when it comes to change, Liam Fitzpatrick says

I have just come across an interesting, if dated piece of research.

Human Resources consultants Towers Perrin report formal communications can claim credit for only about seven per cent of change in the workplace.

Infrastructure and systems, such as the right pay system to reward people or information technology which makes it possible to work differently, shapes 32 per cent of change.

What interested me was the thought that ‘leadership’ is the most influential driver in 61 per cent of change. I guess we all knew it, but did we realise it mattered that much?

If we did, far fewer Internal Communications professionals would have to devote their lives to crafting beautiful prose for the Intranet or turning out media. Getting people to change at work, to adopt new practices or perform better takes more than a pithy bit of copy or a groovy video.

Perhaps we're our own worst enemies? Everyone

loves to produce ‘stuff’ – there's a real buzz seeing the final video edit, and you can't beat the excitement of getting that new Intranet site to work for the first time.

But are we really doing enough to make sure that leaders are excellent communicators?

I'm not referring to crafting better speeches for our bosses – even though reading the hilarious *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots* would suggest we're not doing a great job there anyway. I mean providing the tools and coaching to help bosses get it right.

Good practice seems to involve moving beyond the traditional team briefing formula. Leading communicators are working with HR to provide personal communications training. Sometimes you need to position it as ‘refresher’ training because managers tend to think they are natural born communicators. Yet getting them to turn up and discuss the issue is a major step forward for most of us.

And more and more senior IC people describe themselves as coaches – they see their job as helping to improve the communication performance of those around them. They are quick to point out that their status as trusted advisor depends on delivering the company magazine or making sure the Intranet is in good shape.

But when the world wakes up to the fact that the coaching piece is most valuable, where will it turn for help?

It probably won't be to the people who remain obsessed with producing ‘stuff’. ■

*Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway & Jon Warshawsky – *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*



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