Spin doctors in the spotlight: Effects of strategic press and publicity coverage on perceptions of political PR

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Abstract

News media often engage in strategy framing when covering politics, including strategic press and publicity coverage coined to express the focus on the media's role in the game of politics, as well as politicians' calculated publicity and public relations efforts in relation to the media. This study examines the effect of strategic press and publicity coverage on perceptions of political PR once its practitioners and their publicity efforts have become the object of reporting. Drawing on data from two experiments (n = 863), we show how political PR professionals have themselves little to gain from becoming part of the story.

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Recent studies in political communication have shown that political journalism is increasingly laying bare the news media's and communication professionals' own role in political, strategic, and democratic processes such as election campaigns. Turning the spotlight inward, this form of news content, referred to as metacoverage, explicitly exposes the interdependent yet strained interactions between politics and the press (i.e., “press coverage”) as well as the media strategies that politicians and their communications staff and advisors employ in order to generate publicity, boost their images, and pro- or reactively manage the news (i.e., “publicity coverage”). Studies have signalled that journalists are prone to commonly apply a strategy frame when covering press and publicity processes in politics.

Similar to the detrimental effects on political attitudes associated with so-called “generic” strategy frames, research has shown that strategically framed press and publicity news can indeed contribute to cynical attitudes towards political actors and the political process too. It is unknown, however, how metacoverage impacts on public perceptions of the political communication profession and its practitioners; the very group of actors that has become increasingly part of the media's “restless searchlight.” The goal of this study, therefore, is to extend the research agenda to examine how generic strategy coverage, and strategic press and publicity metacoverage affect individuals’ level of cynicism about political PR. In two similarly designed experiments allowing for replication within a single study, we investigate how exposure to each strategy frame (i.e., generic, press, and publicity strategy) impacts on political PR cynicism when compared with exposure to issue-framed news.
1. Method

Both experiments included four conditions, an immediate posttest, and a between-subjects design. Each of our subjects took part in one experiment only. The stimuli in these experiments embodied multiple versions of two fictitious newspaper stories on two respective issues: liberalization of the health care sector and security measures in air travel. We produced four versions of both articles, each of which framed the story in terms of issue substance, generic strategy, press strategy, or publicity strategy.

The two experiments were conducted between April 6 and 13, 2007. Participants were recruited so as to take into account variation in terms of important demographic indicators (e.g., gender, age, education). They were notified that they would be involved in a study on “current political affairs” and were then randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. A total of 414 subjects participated in the experiment on health care liberalization (49.3 percent male, aged 18–66 years \( M = 43.4 \) years, S.D. = 12.9 years), whereas a total of 449 subjects participated in the experiment on air travel security (44.5 percent male, aged 18–66 years \( M = 42.3 \) years, S.D. = 12.8 years).

The experimental procedure was composed of three stages. First, participants filled out a nonobtrusive pretest questionnaire including items tapping basic demographics, political knowledge, political interest, political efficacy, trust in government, and issue opinions. Second, depending on the random assignment to one of the four conditions in each experiment, participants read a manipulated newspaper article involving either the health care liberalization or air travel security issue. Third, participants completed a posttest questionnaire including items tapping political PR cynicism. After completing the posttest, participants were debriefed and given a gift voucher.

The news material in each experiment comprised coverage of a political event taking place outside the context of an election or referendum campaign. In each of the two stories, a reporter describes a speech in which a government official announces a new policy proposal (about health care legislation and stricter air travel security measures, respectively), serving as the basic cause of the coverage and core story body embedding the different frames. The stories’ issue versions basically represented a mere description of the bottom line of the policy proposal. The generic strategy story version emphasized the performance, style, and perceptions of the government official, analyzed his maneuvers in the light of calculated underlying rationales, used war and sports language, and referred to public opinion polls. The press strategy story version highlighted the adversary relationship between the government official and the press and specifically accentuated the news media’s role as an influential actor in the process of politics, forcing the politician to adjust his tactics to press coverage. Finally, the publicity strategy story version laid emphasis on the politician’s uses of media and public relations acts in somewhat skeptical lights, analyzed his tactical considerations and purposes behind publicity moves, and referred to the politician’s image and presentational style, yet without explicitly reflecting on the media’s own role in this process.

We drew on six items to tap public perceptions of political PR professionals’ motivations and credibility: (1) spin doctors, press officers, and PR professionals are honest with the press and the public; (2) spin doctors, press officers, and PR professionals lose touch with life in the real world after a while; (3) I am frustrated with the way spin doctors, press officers, and PR professionals try to sell politics; (4) spin doctors, press officers, and PR professionals help solve social problems; (5) spin doctors, press officers, and PR professionals politicians look out for their own interests before they look out for the interests of the public; and (6) spin doctors, press officers, and PR professionals are dangerous for democracy. After reversely coding responses to propositions 1 and 4, all items were averaged to form a scale of political PR cynicism ranging from 1 to 7 (health care \( M = 4.57, S.D. = .89, \alpha = .79 \); air security \( M = 4.57, S.D. = .95, \alpha = .83 \)).

2. Results

Both experiments yielded fairly similar results. Cynicism levels among participants in the generic strategy conditions (health care \( M = 4.53 \), air security \( M = 4.66 \)) were found to be somewhat, but not significantly, higher than those among participants in the issue conditions. Much like the subjects in both generic strategy groups, participants exposed to the press strategy frame showed marginally higher cynicism levels in the health care experiment \( (M = 4.55) \), but the mean difference was, again, not significant. Moreover, this finding was not replicated in the air security experiment, where we found cynicism levels to be even lower \( (M = 4.31) \) than those of the issue group participants. Participants in the publicity strategy conditions (health care \( M = 4.78, \) air security \( M = 4.81 \)), finally, did show significantly higher levels of cynicism towards political PR in comparison with participants in the issue conditions (health care \( M = 4.46, \) air security \( M = 4.48 \)). In most cases, strategic news framing proved to shift attitudes towards political communication officials into a more negative direction compared with issue-based news, yet the generic and press strategy news frames fell short of fueling negative attitudes towards political communication officials to a degree that was statistically significant. Effects were most pronounced for “spin spotlighting” publicity news. Although the mean differences between participants in the publicity groups and the two other strategy conditions did not reach significance in most instances, we found the publicity group participants to consistently show considerably higher levels of political PR cynicism relative to participants in the other treatment groups.

We also examined the main effects of the strategy frames while controlling for other potential cynicism predictors in a multivariate analysis. We found that, in both experiments, above and beyond the controls, exposure to the publicity strategy frame strategy frame exposure yielded strongly positive associations with political PR cynicism (health care \( \beta = .18, p < .001 \); air security \( \beta = .15, p < .01 \)). Generic and press strategy framing proved insignificant cynicism predictors. The established main...
effects of strategic publicity news exposure in both regression models reconfirm our initial findings about the cynical impact of the publicity strategy frame.

Furthermore, political knowledge, political interest, and education yielded strongly positive associations with political PR distrust, so that relatively well-informed, attentive and educated participants expressed higher levels of mistrust than those with lower political awareness and education. Conversely, trust in government and support for the policy proposal, as featured in the experimental stimuli, showed robust negative effects. In other words, participants most distrustful of government and most opposed to health care market reforms or stricter air travel security measures were more inclined to adopt a cynical attitude. In the health care experiment, we additionally found a marginally significant negative effect of political efficacy.

3. Discussion

This research offers new insight confirming the credibility and trustworthiness issues surrounding the strategic communications profession, by doing so in the political context of public governance and policy. We demonstrated that exposure to publicity strategy news aroused political PR cynicism relative to issue-based news, but also that generic and press strategy frames did not boost political cynicism levels as significantly as the publicity strategy frame. This suggests that citizens are less likely to adopt a more negative view of political PR unless the profession and its practitioners turn out to be an explicit part of the strategically framed news story. Consequently, the best advice may be for political communication professionals “simply to stay out of the spotlight,” but it is, evidently more effective, in terms of (re)gaining credibility and trust among the general public, to let their public interest motives be known as much as possible.

In addition, we showed that a number of individual characteristics generally associated with political sophistication, i.e., political knowledge, political interest, and education, emerged as having strongly positive impacts on distrust of public relations in politics. Even though we did not replicate all of these findings, our results indicate that politically aware and higher educated participants were more inclined to express distrust towards political PR practitioners than the lower involved and less educated. Although we emphasize that more research on the multidimensionality and measurement of the construct is needed, cynicism, as conceived in this line of research, is perhaps mostly reflective of an interested and critical public stance towards the process of politics and political publicity, which can arguably be seen as rather healthy for a democracy.

The complete study and documentation can be requested from the authors.