Objective Journalism or Copy-Pasted Press Releases: A Preliminary Media Content Analysis

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Summary

The volume of information that is transmitted to the public is constantly growing. Unfortunately, the quantity and quality of information in mass media are often in inverse proportion. Objectivity in reporting and investigative journalism are becoming more of an exception than a rule as journalists invest less effort in their work. Reasons for this are various, ranging from economic to ethical, and we tried to present some of them in this article. The aim of the analysis was to find out what is happening in the process of news creation at a stage between the source of information; in this case the public relations manager, and the end product; a news article written using a press release as a source. For this purpose we have analysed a selected volume of press releases and news articles, and compared their content. The results show a considerable overlap, not just regarding the identical information, but also verbatim copies of whole sections of text. Our preliminary findings call for establishing of a quality-control mechanism that would remedy the situation.

Key words: plagiarism, press release, media article, comparison, paraphrase

Introduction

The right to receive and give information and the freedom of expression are fundamental rights of every human being. The public has the right to know objective facts and other people's opinions and from this right follow the obligations and rights of journalists[1]. They are obliged to comply with the highest professional and ethical standards, but despite of that we are witnesses that this is not always done or even possible to do.

The public likes to be informed of everyday events on a regular basis. The people who they mostly trust and from whom they get the news are journalists from their favorite newspapers or magazines. To gain and obtain such trust, a journalist must at every time give exact, and most importantly, verified information. After recapitulating these principles, we asked ourselves a few questions: "Do they really have enough time for investigative journalism and what is the quality of articles we are reading? Is the source most of the time the same, or do they contain objective observations?". This urged us to do a research of the Croatian media by comparing press releases issued by a public relations agency with the articles published in the media after the PRS is distributed. Clarifying the communication process between the public, journalists and public relations managers in this article we will give an overview of the situation we encountered when doing an analysis of newspaper articles.

Based on the available information, we found that several similar researches were done. Barbara Bearns, a well respected professor at the University of Berlin, back in 1985 wrote her hypothesis on determination in which she stated that public relations determine journalism. Her study showed that most of the published news come from different sections of public relations offices. According to her, almost two thirds of the articles that reported on politics of the German province of North Rhine – Westphalia came from information given to the journalists by the press office, adding that journalist did not consult other sources on received announcements that were based on public relations materials. It was also said that if there were any other researches, that they are mostly focused on requesting statements and postures on events.[2]

Another research which is important to mention was done in 2007, by Julije Katančević, a consultant at "Dobre komunikacije", in which he investigated the use of public sources of informing and concluded that in most cases journalist believe and publish information without investigating it a little bit further.[3] Both

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[1] Verčič, D.; Zavrl, F.; Rijavec, P.; Tkalac Vercic, A.; Laco, K. Media relations. Zagreb: Masmedia, 2004.

[2] Kunczik, M. Public relations: Concepts and theories, 4. ed., Böhlau Verlag, Köln, Weimar and Vienna, 2002.

[3] Malović, S., Sušanj, D., & Jusić, D. (2007, March 9). ICT journalism and public relations. Zagreb, Croatia.

Katančević and Bearns affirmed that journalists investigate less and they increasingly more often use completed materials.

To our knowledge, Croatia does not have any system or law in force that verifies and controls the media's accuracy and to what amount it is allowed to copy an article, even if it's from a PR manager. We can only say that the principle posture agreed upon by the journalists is not to copy, but the reality differs.

According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, the definition of the verb *to plagiarize* is: "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own: use (another's production) without crediting the source, to commit literary theft: present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source"[4].

The word derived from Latin verb *plagere* which means *to kidnap*, *steal*. It implies the act of appropriation or inclusion of someone else's writing or other creative work in their own, in whole or in part, without adequate recognition of another's work. Plagiarism, unlike counterfeiting in which is questionable the authenticity of the work itself, is concerned with false attribution of work. Plagiarism can also happen unintentionally[5].

The Croatian Copyright Law clearly states that "Author's work is an original intellectual creation in literary, scientific and artistic fields, which has individual character, regardless of the manner and form of expression, type, value or purpose"[6]. The Croatian Copyright Law provides information that copyright does not include discoveries, official government texts such as laws, regulations, logs, court decisions, standards, daily news and other news that can be recognized as regular media information. This information was confirmed after an official at the State Intellectual Property Office of the Republic of Croatia (SIPORC) assured us that no manner of public information could be regarded as intellectual property, unless it has individual character. Individual character of one's writing is something that highly praised journalists develop during years of writing and reporting. Their own opinion on the subject is cleverly woven in the textual structure of an article by an unique, individual approach.

There are several different types of plagiarism. According to Plagiarism.org, we can regard plagiarism in form of *sources not cited* and *sources cited* (but still plagiarized). Although the source provides more than enough information on the types of plagiarism, the most commonly found in the results of our research were results of: *another's work*, *copied word-for-word*, *as their own* (most

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[4] Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary: Plagiarize. URL: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plagiarizing (2009, August 25)

[5] Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia: Plagijat. (2009, June 3) URL: http://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagijat (2009, June 21)

[6] Narodne novine (2003) *Zakon o autorskom pravu i srodnim pravima*. Zagreb: Narodne novine d.d., (167)

commonly referred to as the *verbatim copy*); *copying significant portions of text from a single source, without alteration*; *tweaking the sentences to make them fit together while retaining most of original phrasing and paraphrasing most of the text from other sources and make it all fit together*.

Hypothesis

Journalism and public relations can undoubtedly be put in the same professional branch, but even if the same technique is used, these are two different professions with great differences. The role of a PR manager in today's time is indispensable from the company's point of view, because it relies on their activities to communicate with the public. From the journalist's point of view, they provide them with timely information about certain events.

Petra Dorsch (1982), professor Emerita of Social Communication and Media Research at the University of Munich (LMU), found in her research that the lack of public relations managers would cause information gaps, because the actual function of PR managers is to disburden journalist to a certain point.[7] If we lay our complete trust in PR managers, not saying this should be in any way bad, that does not mean that investigative journalism should be ignored. A good article is defined as having accurate data provided by subject of whom the journalist is writing about, and having an additional dose of objectivity and knowledge. On top of that, they should be inputting their own comments if they are going to sign the article. Many of them withhold the information of the source of the information and without any shame sign an article that they have completely copied from the source, taking credit for the work. People believe that because they do not have any reason to distrust the people whose job is to provide information.

According to the HND[8] secretary general, Vladimir Lulić, and HUOJ[9] secretary, Boris Hajoš, and their experiences in practice, it is acceptable for a journalist to copy certain formulations from a press release there aren't hidden ads behind it, if it is about a brief news announcement or if there is limited space available for publishing the information in the publication. Other exceptions also include relaying the announcements from the police, court or state's attorney, or those received minutes before broadcasting an informative program. The general opinion is that PR managers and their clients would be much happier to get dozens of different articles regarding their company than ten articles that are verbatim copies of the same text[10].

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[7] Kunczik, M. Public relations: Concepts and theories, 4. ed., Böhlau Verlag, Köln, Weimar and Vienna, 2002.

[8] Croatian Journalists' Association

[9] Croatian Public Relations Association

[10] Lulić, V. Private message. (2009, August 21); Hajoš, B. Private message. (2009, August 22)

We anticipated that the majority of the articles found in printed media, and especially on internet portals are verbatim copies of the original press release sent to the journalist by a PR manager.

Methods

Our analysis is aimed at recognizing two types of plagiarism. The first type is the *verbatim copy*, which is in recent times colloquially referred to as "*copy-paste*". The second type, which is somewhat harder to detect, is *paraphrasing*, which is defined as "restatement of a text or passage giving the [same] meaning in another form".[11]

In theory, the procedure for spotting verbatim copies is relatively simple. It is only necessary to compare the content of the two documents, and determine whether their content overlaps. Spotting paraphrases is done by close reading of suspected documents, and comparing the meaning of individual sentences or larger parts of texts. Manual comparison is suitable and relatively accurate when fewer documents are examined.

Data Collection

Before carrying out an analysis, it is necessary to choose a set of documents which are suspected to contain plagiarized material. In this article they will be referred to as *derived documents*. After that, a set of documents for which is suspected that the plagiarized material originated from is selected. These documents will be referred to as *source documents*. In our analysis, this was relatively easy due to the fact that we were dealing with a specialized type of documents which are in fact created for the purpose of being a source for media articles.

In a larger collection of documents, this becomes extremely resource-demanding, and would need to be done automatically using search engines and large databases of documents that are potential sources for the content that was plagiarized.

Suspected *source documents* were press releases granted to us by a market communications agency specialized in public relations that produced them for the ICT-related company.

The pool of suspected *derived documents* was created by collecting media articles using a media monitoring service "Press Clipping" and selecting articles from July 2008 – July 2009 period that mentioned a certain ICT- related company. All data provided by the media monitoring service was in .PDF format, so it was necessary to convert it to an editable format, and to extract individual articles. This was done using optical character recognition software ABBY Fine Reader.

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[11] Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary: Paraphrase. URL: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paraphrase (2009, August 25)

As a result we got 217 media articles as suspected *derived documents*, and 26 press releases as suspected *source documents*. All of the documents were published in the same one-year period. Articles from these four types of publications were included in the analysis: daily newspaper, weekly newspaper, monthly magazine, and Internet news portal article. The average length of articles was around 400 words.

Pairing of documents

The first step of the analysis was to pair *source* and *derived* documents. This was done in three steps. The first was comparing the publication dates and discarding *derived documents* with publication dates earlier than *source documents*. Documents with small interval in publication were paired together during the first pass. The next step was to pair documents according to titles. Where there was ambiguity, we compared the two documents by preliminary comparing the content of two documents with regards to topic.

Out of 217 articles, we were able to link 131 of them with a corresponding press release, providing an average 5.03 articles per press release. The other 86 articles were mostly false positive search results, or covered the ICT-related company in a way that was completely unrelated to topics covered by available press releases.

In order to show more reliable results, only four pairs of documents that had *source – derived* document ratio higher than 10 were selected for an in-depth analysis.

Analysis

The analysis was done on a sample of four *source* documents, and 60 *derived* documents.

The documents were prepared for semi-automatic comparison by trimming additional content except the title and content. The comparison itself was done using the *Compare documents* feature in Microsoft Word 2007. After the tool marked all the words that occurred in the same places in both documents, and manually correcting the results, the word-count tool was used to measure the size of the copied content.

During manual correction, only word strings longer than three words were counted as copied. Names of organizations and products, formal titles, and common phrases were not regarded as copied content.

The number of completely and partially copied sentences was determined by manual inspection. The number of paraphrased sentences was determined after close reading of the remainder of the document.

Results

The results show that the highest percentage of copied words, sentences and paraphrased parts of the PRS is in weekly (88.5% / 97.6%) and monthly (85.2%

/ 87.5%) editions analysed. We should accentuate that the number of weekly editions is not representative in this analysis so this should be verified by a more focused inquiry. The Internet editions copied as high as 35.25% / 51.2% and the smallest percentage has been reported in daily newspapers (25.75% / 41.41%), business newspapers – usually daily editions (34.44% / 37.2%).

The number of words in an article should also be taken into consideration because although the monthly and weekly editions have the greatest percentage of copied content, they have by far the smallest amount of words per article. Weekly editions have an average of 274.66 words while the monthly editions have an average of 318.41 words. Internet editions have an average of 344.41 words; daily editions have an average of 460.5 words while business editions have the highest average of 503.66 words per article.

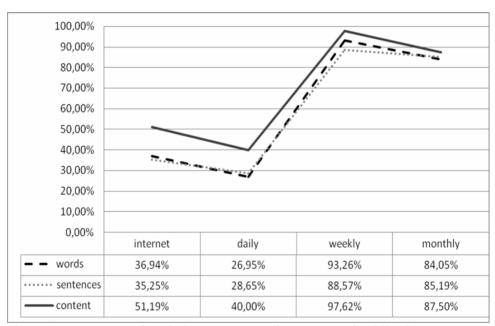|	internet	daily	weekly	monthly
– – words	36,94%	26,95%	93,26%	84,05%
⋯⋯ sentences	35,25%	28,65%	88,57%	85,19%
—— content	51,19%	40,00%	97,62%	87,50%

Figure 1: Percentage of copied content according to type of publication

On average, the percentage of copied content is highest in articles with fewer than 200 words in size, with 6 of 11 articles entirely consisting of whole sentences extracted from press releases. In total 16 of 45 articles, more than one third are written by copying or rephrasing the press releases, i.e. without any original contribution by the author.
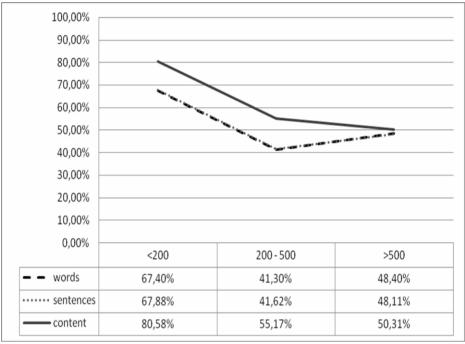
	<200	200-500	>500
– – words	67,40%	41,30%	48,40%
······ sentences	67,88%	41,62%	48,11%
—— content	80,58%	55,17%	50,31%

Figure 2: Percentage of copied content according to size of articles

Interpretation of results

The aim of a public relations manager is that his press release is used by the journalist to have truthful, complete and utterly reliable information. His/her services do not stop when he distributes the information; he/she is available for any other inquires. A good relationship between a journalist and public relations manager is based on long term experience and a good business relationship after years of working together. To public relations managers the most important thing is to preserve their credibility and reliability in their work. A public relations manager's reputation is everything in his job. Losing it will be job threatening, depending on the scale of his mistake. For a journalist, a worse situation can happen, if he is known to be low-quality, non-creative and non-professional, or in other words, loses his professional integrity. Although, we can fall in a trap of blaming solely them for copying an entire article, we must consider that the same article has to go through the hands of editor in chief, or column editors before it gets published. There is a whole hierarchy through which the article has to be run through, and it is evident that it fails to detect plagiarisms. Although it is logical that every PR manager is pleased when his press release gets published in whole, and when a journalist mentions his client in a positive way, there is a breach of professional ethics in taking credit for someone else's written work. The results show that the same press release gets published word by word in more than a few articles. To what extent does this practice contribute

to the credibility of the information, the objectivity of the journalist, and their professionalism? Is the real intent really accomplished?! Such text should be used as a starting point for further investigations and journalists should not completely rely on it to use it and present it as a finished article. Sometimes the reason lies in journalists' nonchalance, or it is done when they are struggling with a deadline and are under pressure, not having enough time to do research for the article. At times they have to write multiple articles for the same newspaper issue, or they are unfamiliar with the topic. Often the problem lies in the lack of specialised journalists in the newspaper and/or low fees they get paid for their job. Often we come to realize that a specialised approach is needed when dealing with topics that require a certain level of understanding of the topic. In many cases, unfortunately, the lack of professionalism has roots in more than just one problem.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to show the current situation in printed media in terms of originality. While investigating the reasons that could explain the results of our study we noticed that one of the problems lies behind the financial issues that editors have at hand. Publishing many of the monthly editions is costly and editors mainly rely on big advertisers as most of their profit comes from them. Journalists reportedly practice self-censorship to protect the economic interest of owners and major advertisers. Lacking the sufficient money to employ more people they are liable to search cheap work force in inexperienced students. And when that doesn't help they are forced to completely rely on press release to fulfil their columns and pages. Even though the results show a high percentage of "copy-pasting" they cannot be viewed without taking into consideration the outer and inner factors that might have influenced the publishing.

In order to conduct this type of analysis more easily, it is necessary to develop adequate tools that would enable the comparison of a much higher volume of articles in order to get more reliable results and ensure a more frequent analysis as one of the methods of quality control in journalism which would help in creating an information society that is more objectively informed.

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