Full length article

Ten shades of truth: A study of Australian journalists' shift to political PR

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ABSTRACT

The use of manipulative overt and covert 'spin' tactics by parliamentary media advisers to embellish, obfuscate and evade has been well documented. However, there has been less attention paid to the way journalists adapt to 'spin' culture and interpret truth once they become parliamentary media advisers. Based on inductive analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews with twenty-one Australian journalists who made the transition to parliamentary media advising, this paper offers a typology of ten subtle approaches to truth telling adopted by these journalists in their new role as political media advisers. The interview data revealed a range of pragmatic approaches including: 'triage', 'putting the best foot forward', 'never tell a lie', 'playing a dead bat', and 'don't ask, don't tell'. Through the comparative insights of journalists who have worked as parliamentary media advisers, the practitioner reflections in this paper complicate the blunt conception of the mendacious 'spin-doctor' and point to the malleability of 'truth' in both communications roles.

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1. Introduction

In western liberal democracies political media advising or 'spin-doctoring' has long been perceived to have a troubled relationship with truth. In popular culture, scholarly and broader literature, political public relations practitioners have been portrayed as "enemies of democracy, pathological liars, communication perverts and pornographers" (McNair, 2004; 337). In contrast the idealised role of the 'watchdog' reporter as defender of democracy and seeker of truth and has come to dominate professional conceptions of journalism (Louw, 2010; Nerone, 2013; Zelizer, 2012).

The centrality of truth to journalism's professional self-conception cannot be overstated. A journalist's obligation to tell the truth appears prominently in journalism codes of ethics and professional handbooks (I.F.J., 1986; MEAA, 1998; S.P.J., 2014). As such, journalism's claim to truth "legitimizes journalism's special position as Fourth Estate" (Broersma, 2010; 25). While substantial work has been done on the types of 'spin' tactics adopted by political media advisers generally, there has been little focus on the transition from journalism to political media advising and how journalists manage issues of 'truth' in both roles. While this paper is based on a targeted qualitative study of Australian journalists who crossed over to political PR, their insights are relevant to reporters, media advisers and PR practitioners in other countries such as the UK, US, Canada and New Zealand, which have traditionally had a strong adherence to the journalistic norm of objectivity, and who are dealing with issues of truth in their daily working lives.

2. Literature review

2.1. 'Selective' and 'factually accurate' truth

Questions about the nature of truth have occupied philosophers for thousands of years and attempting to define what is meant by truth is well beyond the bounds of this paper. However, for the purposes of this journal article it is sufficient to point to two dominant approaches to truth. One is an objectivist approach to truth which can be understood as: "A belief is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact" (Glanzberg, 2014). This factual approach to truth reaches back to ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle and his work Metaphysics 1011b25: "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" (Aristotle, 1984). In contrast to this positivist approach are constructivist theories (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, Blumer, 1969/1988) that contend reality – and thereby truth – is socially constructed, open to interpretation and dependent on individual perception.

This generalised division between the objectivist, factual truth, and the constructivist interpretive truth also runs through the journalism ethics literature and is applied by reporters in their daily work. Verifiable truth is the version of truth that the majority of journalists identify with in relation to their obligation to tell the truth when they are reporting (McQuail, 2013; 57). This is demonstrated by Pew Research Centre survey study of American journalists which found "getting the facts right" was seen as the most important value of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007; 36). As Jacquette (2010; 216) asserted: "Truth is the gold standard by which journalists are judged...Truth telling is a positive correspondence with the state of the world, with the facts". In this paper, this objectivist version of truth is referred to as *factually accurate truth*.

However, a news story is not just a list of facts – it is a narrative, which also includes interpretation, inferences to causal explanation and linkages to broader context (Burns, 2013; Harcup & O'Neill, 2009; Tuchman, 1978). Through a process of selection a journalist identifies what story will or won't be told. He or she then selects who to interview, what quotes and information to use and places them in a certain order to tell a story that explains an event to the public. Throughout this paper, this constructivist version of truth is referred to as *selective truth*.

This selective approach to truth telling is central to public relations practice as well (Barney & Black, 1994; Deaver, 1990). Whereas selectivity in journalism is an essential by-product of the story creation process, in public relations practice, Deaver (1990) argued that selectivity with the truth was the result of PR's goal to persuade. Even if the persuasive element may be subtle, "it must be present because the distinguishing characteristic of public relations writers is that they owe their allegiance to a corporate or institutional employer, rather than to the public; to selective persuasion rather than to objective information" (Deaver, 1990). The complexity of truth telling in PR is explored in the work of L'Etang (1997), Deaver (1990), Englehardt and Evans (1994), and Glenny (2010). L'Etang (1997; 35) argued "The supposed dichotomy between truth and lying somewhat oversimplifies the public relations ethics as existing in choices between truth and untruth" and that practitioners and students would benefit from a greater understanding of the theories of truth to help manage this complexity. L'Etang (1997) drew on Deaver's (1990) concept of a continuum, which places truth – or the intent to be open and honest – at one end, and blatant lies – or a conscious intent to deceive – at the other. While there is general agreement that "lying is unacceptable in most situations", Englehardt and Evans (1994; 249) argued "deception and concealment are justified when harm and relationships are considered in some dilemmas". This view was echoed by public service communicators in more recent Australian research by Glenny (2010), which found practitioners highlighted the importance of contextual circumstances when justifying decisions about whether to be more or less truthful in representing the interests of the government. However, the ethical challenge facing PR practitioners according to Barney and Black (1994; 242) is to ensure that representing the client's interests does not "become overly destructive to society's interest".

2.2. Spin tactics

In response to concerns about the use of manipulative 'spin' tactics by media advisers employed by the Blair Government in the UK, Gaber (2000) catalogued a range of what he called 'overt' and 'covert' approaches to information management. In this analysis of government 'spin' Gaber (2000; 508) described 'overt' or 'above-the-line' tactics as activities that 'would have caused an "old fashioned" press officer no great difficulty'. Examples of such 'overt' tactics included the routine use of press releases to make government announcements, speeches and reaction to media events, or what Gandy (1982) would have described as 'information subsidies'. In contrast, Gaber (2000; 508) described 'below-the-line' tactics as activities "now more associated with the term 'spin-doctor' – usually covert and as much about strategy and tactics as about the imparting of information (indeed, it could be argued that they have very little to do with imparting information)". Under this category of 'covert' tactics, Gaber (2000; 510–516) identified a range of eighteen manipulative approaches to information management, including, 'fire breaking', 'laundering', and 'throwing out the bodies' all of which involve either setting up a diversion, or using the cover of other events to deflect attention from a damaging story; 'stoking the fire' to keep alive a story that is damaging to your opponents; 'kite-flying' to test public reaction to policy proposals before making a commitment to announcing them; and 'bullying and intimidation' of journalists and news organisations for unfavourable reporting. In addition, Richardson's (2002) examination of 'spin' techniques contributed several other covert tactics to Gaber's (2000) list. Those included, 'the leak' or strategically providing certain information to a particular journalist; 'the freeze'- punishing a reporter; 'the spray' – which is effectively publically bullying the media; 'the wedge' – which the author says is 'best explained as the divide and conquer principle'; and 'the drip' or keeping a steady flow of information to favoured reporters (Richardson, 2002; 173–181).

Each of the 'covert' tactics described by Gaber (2000) and Richardson (2002) imply a calculated approach to information management that is purely driven by political considerations on the part of media adviser. Other common tactics involve 'off-the-record' briefings to reporters (Dindler, 2014), the use of exclusives or 'drops' (McKnight, 2015; Moloney, 2001; Quinn, 2012) and 'agenda cutting' (Colistra, 2012; Macnamara, 2014), or as Davis (2002; 27) described it: "For every story being fed to the media there is another being carefully kept out".

In addition to the literature on truth in PR and journalism, the work of two moral philosophers Sisella Bok and Bernard Williams is useful to this discussion. Bok's (1989) work on secrets and lying (1978/1999) offers nuanced reflections on the ethics of concealment and revelation of information and the role and impact of truth and lies in public life. Williams (2002) argument that the two virtues of accuracy and sincerity need to be present in order for someone to tell the truth is also poignant in relation to the practitioners' reflections in this paper. Building on this foundation of scholarship, this article offers an additional layer of subtle tactical approaches to truth management that the journalists in this paper recalled using once they moved into the role of parliamentary media adviser.

3. Methodology

The impetus for this paper grew out of wider doctoral research examining the career transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising and back again (Fisher, 2014). The broader research was a micro level study concerned with perceptions of individual experience of shifting between journalism and political PR. Specifically it explored what, if any, ethical conflicts journalists experienced moving between the two roles. The study drew on the philosophical traditions of phenomenology, hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism, which view reality as being constructed through individual interpreted experience and constantly changing. This is particularly useful in understanding the variety of individual experience and the importance of context, tactics and strategic thinking in a constantly changing political environment. In addition, this paper draws on Role theory (Biddle, 1986), which has links to symbolic interactionism through the work of George Herbert Mead (1932) and the Chicago School. Role Theory is a useful theoretical tool in helping to define generalised boundaries around normative expectations of role behaviour based on dominant role perceptions, particularly if those perceived role boundaries are transgressed, as is the case in relation to journalists shifting to PR.

The inductive, qualitative study from which this paper has been drawn was undertaken in Australia 2010–2014. Purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used to identify the specific cohort of journalist who had work as parliamentary media advisers and returned to journalism (Bryman, 2008; 458–459). This resulted in twenty-one semi-structured interviews with practitioners about their individual experiences of shifting from 'watchdog' to 'spin-doctor'. Eighteen of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and three over the telephone. The sample included 8 female and 13 male practitioners who had worked for federal and/or state Members of Parliament, and for Opposition party and/or Government MPs. The interviewees had mixed backgrounds in commercial and/or public sector media organisations, in broadcast and/or print. Despite this variation in background, all had made the shift from journalism to parliamentary media advising – meaning they were employed by elected MPs, not the bureaucracy or party headquarters. An "aide memoire" (Minichiello, Rosalie, Eric, & Loris, 1995) was used to guide the direction of the interviews which covered three phases of the career shift, namely: becoming a journalist; the transition to political PR; and the return to reporting. Each interview included discussion about perceptions of 'spin' and the way each practitioner managed pressures of confidentiality, truth and lies. This paper is based on the data relating to discussion of these latter topics. Each of the twenty-one interviews was transcribed manually by the author. A general inductive approach (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Thomas, 2006 Thomas, 2006) was taken to analysing the data. This involved a process of multiple close readings of the data, first and second cycle coding (Saldana, 2009) from which categories and key themes emerged, many of which have been given in vivo headings taken from the transcripts.

4. Findings

4.1. Triage

In contrast to some of the more defensive and controlling approaches to truth documented by Gaber (2000) and Richardson (2002), the central tactic of 'triage' was used by one ministerial media adviser for purely logistical reasons. At the height of a contentious policy debate, the interviewee said he sometimes received 'literally a hundred plus phone calls a day'. In order to manage the workload, he said 'you've got to triage' the media's inquiries. To demonstrate how the triage process might work, he described the following scenario:

> I've got twenty calls I have to respond to by six o'clock tonight and three of them are really bad. The journo is on to something and I have to marshal a lot of complex information and get my head around it and turn it in to a meaningful response. Three of them are in that category. Six of them I will hand on to the department because they are standard things that aren't a high priority. The ones in the middle I am just going to have to give them the standard lines because I don't have time to give them anything else. It's a safe option.

As the interviewee explained, of the twenty media inquiries, only three of them would have received his full attention because they were the most difficult to manage. The majority of the media enquiries would have received what he called 'the standard lines' containing the key political messages. He explained this further:

> In a way the responses you give when there's a lot of intense incoming queries become more stock standard and you're giving people just the standard lines, which when I was a journalist I used to think 'that's not a very good answer. That's just obvious lines', but partly you do that just to get through the day. Partly you do that because you make a quick evaluation that's all that is appropriate in this case.

As a result of this prioritisation process, the interviewee acknowledged that some journalists who received the brief 'standard lines' might have perceived them as intentional 'spin', even though the motivation was to simply manage his workload, not to evade or obfuscate. Regardless of the motivation, the interviewee accepted that those 'standard lines' might have unintentionally had the same effect.

4.2. Putting the best foot forward

The 'standard lines' included 'putting the best foot forward' which the majority of interviewees perceived this to be synonymous with 'spin'. However, given the negative connotations of mendacity attached to 'spin' they were careful to make a distinction between accentuating the positive and 'lying':

> I certainly never told a lie. There was a certain amount of gilding the lily and putting the best foot forward.

> We didn't fib to anyone. We just put the best gloss on things we could.

> 'Spin' is 'spin'. That can be clever advocacy accentuating the positive. It's not lying.

This more benign interpretation of 'spin' was echoed in Downes (1998, 279–280) research of US congressional media advisers, who described 'spin' as putting "the best angle on a story" or to put "one's best side forward".

4.3. Never tell a lie

One of the key findings to emerge from the interview data was the importance of truth – or more specifically 'not lying' – to the interviewees' sense of ethical wellbeing during their transition from journalism to parliamentary media advising. By not 'lying' and continuing to adhere to the journalistic principle of *factually accurate truth*, the interviewees argued they experienced little, if any, ethical unease when they moved from journalism to media advising.

The interview data also revealed that the interviewees' commitment to not telling a lie was both ethical and pragmatic. As Carty (1992; 3) in L'Etang (1997; 35) described it: 'The correct advice is always to tell the truth because lies are wrong and damage the organisation. Also, they are usually found out and the liar is not trusted again':

> I mean it's just deadly and wrong anyway, to feed out anything that's inaccurate.

> Certainly if you lie you will come undone. So you never tell an untruth.

> Yeah. I always had a position of never lie. . . because it hurts your minister.

However, some did allow themselves the 'white lie' of saying 'I don't know', which is described directly below.

4.4. I don't know

The transcripts revealed that half of the interviewees recalled adopting the tactic of saying 'I don't know' in response to questions from journalists they could not or did not want to answer. They would say 'I don't know' because it was considered less revealing than saying 'no comment', which might inadvertently lead a journalist to suspect that there was a story buried somewhere. In some instances the interviewees said they truly did not know the answer to the question, so the response was both accurate and honest. On other occasions however, some of the interviewees said they did know the answer, but could not divulge the information for political, security or legal reasons such as defamation and privacy. As one former ministerial adviser explained it, he did not support lying in principle, but he did allow himself the 'white lie' of saying 'I don't know' in certain circumstances:

> For instance a decision has been taken in cabinet and I used to sit in the National Security Committee of cabinet and you are legally obliged not to reveal information. So if someone asks 'has cabinet decided on this or that?' Then I would often say 'I don't know'. . . for legal reasons you can't say.

Other interviewees said they used the phrase 'I don't know' as a form of defensive protection from unwelcome media inquiries. One former journalist-turned prime ministerial media adviser described what he called the 'press secretary walk':

Where you walk so briskly with a mobile phone to your ear – even if it weren't turned on – just to deflect the questions. It's like seagulls. You're walking down the corridor with a packet of chips and the seagulls are coming for them and asking you things . . . the safest words were 'I don't know', especially if they had the merit of being true.

Another ministerial media adviser adopted a different approach to avoid telling a lie. She said she made a point of asking not to be told sensitive information so that she could honestly say 'I don't know' without feeling compromised:

I still try to stick to that rule, that if it's really sensitive and really big, then I don't want to know before time and our chief of staff has the same attitude.

4.5. Truth but not the whole truth

Several of the interviewees said they made a point of providing certain journalists only with the information they requested and not one skerrick more. Just under half of the interviewees said that while they endeavoured to tell the truth in response to media inquiries, they were selective and did not necessarily tell the 'whole truth':

You are definitely drip-feeding the truth. . . you are releasing information on an as-needs basis and the pace of release of that information is normally determined by someone other than you and it's normally your boss. So you might be given strict parameters as an adviser to brief the journalist. You can tell them about this bit but we are leaving this up our sleeve to counter an argument we are going to have against this. I never felt I was doing anything dishonest, but yeah, drip feeding the truth is the only real way I can describe it.

4.6. Don't ask, don't tell

One of the first tactics learned by one of the interviewees when he crossed over from journalism to ministerial media advising was not to offer up more information than had been asked for by a reporter, especially if that information was potentially damaging. After six months on the job, the interviewee said he came to understand why press secretaries did not reveal all available information to journalists:

There are whole bunches of reasons why you're not just going to blurt out everything. A journo might say, 'well that's not lying, but it's misleading or it's withholding information' and I guess when I was a journo I might have leant towards that view. But I wasn't naïve and you wouldn't really expect governments to give information to you that they didn't have to and that was damaging. Why would anyone expect anyone to do that? Well I guess I'm not going to do that. But that is different to telling people an untruth. That's an important difference for me in terms of my personal set of values and also something that my minister has made clear is important to him.

A similar approach was also found in both Phillipps (2002) and Downes (1998) research into press secretaries.

4.7. Temporarily withholding

At times the former journalists said they would be asked to temporarily withhold information from the media in order to release it at a time most advantageous to the politician they worked for. While strategic issues might have resulted in delayed release of the information, the interviewees said the information was later made available at a time of the politician's choosing:

I didn't feel that my job was to withhold information except where it was going to be better to withhold it for a certain amount of time so that it could be presented in the best possible way.

I remember having discussions saying 'we need to release this' and them saying 'no' and I lost the argument...The argument was, 'yes, any other time but this is not the right political environment for it'. It was about timing. It ended up getting released by the way, under [the next minister].

4.8. Get rid of it now

In contrast, the aim of this seventh tactic was to release all of the damaging information on an issue at one time, so that the negative story would be dealt with quickly, rather than allowing it to bleed for weeks in the media. Two former prime ministerial media advisers expressed it this way:

It's a truism in politics – If you've got to eat a shit sandwich you've got to eat it straight away· · ·The advice was always, 'get rid of it now. Go and deal with it now'.

We're getting it out there. We've got to get this over and done with.

This tactic differs from what Gaber (2000; 151) called 'throwing out the bodies' which described the release of damaging information under the cover of a major distraction, whereas 'getting rid of it now' was employed by these interviewees to stop the ongoing damage of a negative story.

4.9. Bore them to death

Rather than constantly pursuing media coverage, the interview data revealed that sometimes avoiding media coverage was the tactically desired goal. One way to do this was to 'bore them to death' in the hope that the journalist would lose interest. One interviewee reflected:

> Looking back we gave them really, really dumb comments...Our Modus Operandi was to keep things out of the paper, so if there was a big issue we'd feed them really, really, bland comments. . .bore them to death. It worked.

4.10. Playing a dead bat

If the bland comments did not kill off the unwanted story, then not supplying an answer to certain media inquiries was also attempted. An Opposition media adviser said "sometimes you can kill the story just by not responding to it, that sort of thing – playing a dead bat".

5. Discussion

The reflections of the 21 journalists interviewed revealed a range of subtle responses to truth-telling once they became parliamentary media advisers. The typology of ten *subtle tactics* highlights several key factors in determining these former journalists approach to truth in the new PR role. Firstly, the importance of role conceptions and expectations in relation to truth; secondly, the importance of the constantly shifting political context; thirdly, the importance of 'not lying' to the former journalists sense of ethical well-being; and finally, similarities between journalism and PR through the use of *selective truth*.

Having come from journalism with its professional identity so bound up with 'truth' it is interesting to see how these former reporters adapted to political PR which is steeped in historical conceptions of mendacity and manipulation. Despite the antithetical positioning of the two roles, the former journalists approached parliamentary media advising in a pragmatic way. Rather than black and white interpretations of truth and lies, the practitioners revealed more nuanced truth tactics depending on the political context.

The term 'context' is very broad and is virtually limitless. In considering the context of a person's actions and ethical decision making a wide range of factors can contribute to the particular circumstances that lead to a person's behaviour in a given situation. As Tetlock, Randall, Jennifer, and Lerner (1996; 35) explained, 'people do not make decisions in a social vacuum'. Every day people make decisions about what course of action to take in particular circumstances. Some of those choices might involve striking compromises between role expectations and personal values, or 'pragmatic pressures and moral ideals' (Tetlock, 2003; 324). Whether working as a journalist or as a parliamentary media adviser many of the interviewees in this study recognised that they were required to weigh up pragmatic pressures of the role they were in against the moral ideal of truth in relation to the use of information.

The former journalists understood in their new role it was their job to represent the interests of the politician and to put the politician's 'best foot forward'. As described by one of the interviewees, simply trying to do this and manage a massive workload meant that 'standard' glib lines were often provided to reporters as a form of 'triage' in an attempt to prioritise the most important press inquiries. The interviewee conceded that as a reporter he would have seen those lines as intentional 'spin' and not considered them to be a by-product of a heavy workload.

The former journalists also understood that it in certain political circumstances, such as national security or the workings of cabinet they were not permitted to tell the truth, if indeed they were even privy to it. Instead they were comfortable with telling a white lie and saying 'I don't know'. Moral philosopher, Bok (1978/1999; 57–58) described a 'white lie' as a 'falsehood that is not meant to injure anyone' as opposed to a 'black lie' that involves a 'serious breach of trust, capable of invoking serious damage' (Camden, Motley, & Wilson, 1984; 309). Based on Bok (1978/1999) and Camden et al.'s (1984) reasoning, the interviewee's claim not to know something because he was not able to reveal due to national security reasons, even though he *did* know, might reasonably fall into the category of 'white lie'. By saying 'I don't know' he was not intentionally falsifying information that had been requested by a journalist and thereby distorting the reporter's understanding of events. He was lying about his knowledge of the existence of certain information. One could possibly argue that by saying 'I don't know' the aim was not to injure the other person, but to protect him-self from divulging information he was not permitted to divulge in that role. Whether saying 'I don't know' in the circumstances the interviewee described can or cannot be classified as a 'white lie', is in fact not that important. The value of the comments lies in their demonstration of how perceptions of contextual factors – such as national security and cabinet confidentiality – can have an impact on conceptions of truth and disclosure (Fisher, 2015).

For other politically tactical reasons such as beneficial timing, the former reporters said they also temporarily withheld information. Although this approach also appears in other studies of parliamentary media advisers in Australia (Phillipps,

2002; 112), the United States and Canada (Downes, 1998; 281; Ericson, Patricia, & Janet, 1989; 219) it raises the question of whether 'leaving information up your sleeve' or withholding information is the same as telling a lie. Moral philosopher Bok (1989) argued that withholding information is not necessarily unethical unless the intention of the person withholding the information intends to deceive the requester of the information. After all, she said it is not possible to tell 'the whole truth' (Bok, 1989; 4). On Deaver's (1990) continuum from truth to blatant lies, he characterises this type of selective use of information for the purposes of persuasion as less than truthful, but short of lying, a position also supported by practitioners. Studies show that people working in the PR field do see a distinction between withholding information and lying. In a survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America, Cincinnati Chapter, nearly three quarters (70 percent) of those surveyed 'agreed or strongly agreed that "ethically there is a difference between telling a lie and withholding the truth" (Schick, 1989 in Schick, 1994; 8).

The interviewees also revealed that if an issue was damaging they would not offer information unless it was requested, and then only provide exactly what was asked for, and not one iota more. However, as long as they 'did not tell a lie' these former journalists said they did not experience ethical conflict changing roles. By 'not lying' – or providing information to the media that was factually inaccurate – they were able to justify using these subtle truth tactics and feel comfortable in their new PR role.

On the one hand, the interviewees' adaptation of truth demonstrates successful socialization in the new PR role with its goal of representing and promoting a client's interest. On the other hand, it also reflects the interviewees' familiarity with *selective truth*, a skill they developed working in the newsroom and were able to apply in their new PR role. As one of the interviewees expressed it:

Do people select things in journalism? Yes they do. They select things a lot. . . there are several ways of looking at any situation. We pick one of them. You could pick another.

As described earlier, journalists use both *factually accurate* and *selective truth* when writing stories. It is a selective process that creates a particular version of events (Burns, 2013; Harcup & O'Neill, 2009; Tuchman, 1978). It is this selective version of truth that political media advisers are also required to adopt as they release information in the interests of the politician they work for.

It should be stressed that being selective does not imply that the information provided by the reporter or parliamentary media adviser is factually wrong, but it points to what Williams (2002) called "sincerity" on the part of the communicator, and whether he or she aim to intentionally deceive or not (Bok, 1978/1999). It raises questions about the completeness of the selections made and whether enough information has been given for the public to understand what events have taken place (Klaidman and Beauchamp, 1987). It also poses the challenge of ensuring that representing the client's interests does not "become overly destructive to society's interest" (Barney and Black, 1994; 242).

6. Conclusion

Given the phenomenological nature of the study and this paper, and its focus on individual perceptions of Australian journalists, it is not possible to generalise these findings across all who have made the career transition between journalism and parliamentary media advising, but that was not the aim of the broader research, nor the goal of this paper. The aim was to gain insights into how individual Australian journalists have managed the transition between these two roles, two roles that have traditionally been characterised by blunt black and white portrayals.

In contrast to this historical antipathy between 'watchdogs' and 'spin doctors', this paper does not reveal sharp binary distinctions between truth and 'spin'. Instead it offers a more complex picture of truth-telling in the context journalism and political PR that fall a long a continuum, or as Deaver (1990; 169) described it: "Something of a grey scale from one extreme to the other" with many shades of truth in between.

Through the unique comparative insights of communication practitioners who have worked as both journalists and parliamentary media advisers in Australia, the typology of ten subtle approaches to truth described here offer a glimpse into the way journalists trained as 'truth seekers' pragmatically adapted to a role in political PR and its truth expectations. In doing so, it highlights the malleability of truth in both roles and the transferability of *selective* and *factually accurate* conceptions of truth between them. And it also complicates the simple caricature of the mendacious, cynical 'spin-doctor' by considering the impact of workload and other contextual factors on truth-telling in an ever changing, complex political environment.

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