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## Full Length Article

# Toward professional standards for media transparency in the United States: Comparison of perceptions of non-transparency in national vs. regional media

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of the national survey of 287 Public Relations Society of America members regarding current media transparency practices in the United States. The purpose of the study was to understand the forms of media non-transparency that exist in the United States, levels of non-transparency at the national and local/regional media, and perceptions of non-transparent practices by the public relations practitioners in the country. The project builds on previous research on global media transparency (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2011) and uses Tsetsura's (2005) framework to study media transparency. The survey results showed that direct media bribery is not a pressing issue in the United States; however, indirect media pressures that involve new forms of content creation, including native advertising and content marketing, are worrisome. Specifically, forms of indirect media bribery are common at the local and regional media levels in the USA. Research findings demonstrate that U.S. practitioners experience particular non-transparent challenges when working with the media and recognize financial pressures that U.S. media outlets face today.

The results provide a basis for creating standards in U.S. practice to ensure that new forms of content creation, including native advertising and content marketing, are not acceptable at any level when sources of content are not disclosed. The study concludes with the discussion about the importance of understanding how new forms of sponsored content relate to media transparency in the USA and why U.S. practitioners should understand how media non-transparency relates to the issues of native advertising and brand journalism.

## 1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, media transparency has seen more attention from scholars, and for important reasons. [Kruckeberg and Tsetsura \(2003\)](#) argued that media bribery and non-transparency mock the ethics and professionalism of journalism and public relations, and it keeps citizens of different countries from making informed decisions. Furthermore, when media bribery, which can be direct cash-for-coverage or indirect influences from advertisers, news sources, governments, or corporations for coverage, takes place, it can hurt the credibility of public relations, which is a profession that has historically struggled with credibility ([Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003](#)). However, the research on media transparency, also referred to as *media non-transparency* and *media bribery*, is relatively young. The first time that media transparency research was conducted was in 2003 when a media bribery index was published that ranked countries on the likelihood journalists would seek cash for news coverage ([Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003](#)).

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Since then, several studies on media bribery have been conducted (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009; Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010, 2011; Tsetsura, 2005; Tsetsura, 2008). Currently, the majority of the existing research is focused on Eastern European countries that ranked low on the index, such as Poland (Tsetsura, 2005), Russia (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2011; Tsetsura & Luoma-aho, 2010), Ukraine (Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009), and Romania (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010). However, there is no research on countries that were ranked high on the 2003 Media Bribery Index.

The purpose of this study was to understand whether media non-transparency exists in the United States, at what levels (national or local/regional), and whether communication leaders view media bribery practices as acceptable. The study utilized Tsetsura's (2005) framework to study media transparency, and the survey instrument that was implemented has been used in previous media transparency research, which can help with cross-country comparisons in the future.

The purpose of this study was to describe a current media transparency situation in the United States, which is ranked fifth on the media bribery index, because U.S. media practices might have changed since the original index was published in 2003 (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003). The practical implication of this study is that U.S. public relations professionals will understand the state of media transparency in the USA and will evaluate ethical implications of the situation for the profession, not only in the USA, but also abroad.

As previous scholars have identified, there are issues of media transparency in terms of sourcing, as well as the role that press releases play as an information subsidy. As the number of public relations professionals in the USA, as well as globally, increases — and the journalism industry is changing — researchers need to understand what kind of effect the potential shift in the public relations/journalism relationship might have on media transparency. Current research on media transparency in the USA can help to create opportunities for U.S.-based public relations professionals to be proactive in discussions as to why media transparency is imperative for public relations to be an ethical profession. Additionally, the researchers hope that by reviewing the research results of the survey among members of professional communities, such as PRSA, professionals will have an opportunity to support media transparency principles and guidelines and will encourage transparency between public relations professionals and journalists. Furthermore, as native advertising emerges as a new phenomenon in the United States, new ethical implications of media transparency should be reviewed and discussed.

In addition to building upon the existing media transparency literature by studying a country that, according to the media bribery index, has a lower likelihood of cash for media coverage, this study also has practical implications. The participants in the current study were members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), a prominent public relations and communications professional organization in the United States. PRSA is the nation's largest community of public relations and communications professionals, with over 21,000 members (PRSA, 2017), and is an advocate for standards of excellence and principles of ethics. By involving PRSA in the research, the organization and its members can engage in dialogue about media transparency in the USA, and potentially around the world, and why it is important, both professionally and ethically, for media bribery issues to be resolved.

Studying media transparency in the USA is an important step in continuing to move forward the public relations profession, as well as journalism. Although the United States is ranked fifth on the 2003 Media Bribery Index (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2003), there is a good possibility media practices have since changed. The 2008 economic recession and the fact that tens of thousands of U.S. journalists have since lost their jobs have implications for media transparency. Fewer journalists must now do more with smaller budgets and therefore rely heavily on public relations professionals as information subsidies. Therefore, it is important to examine U.S. media practices to ensure that, under these restricted timelines and budgets, journalists and public relations professionals are being transparent and ethical in their practices. The current study will contribute to U.S. practitioners and scholars' body of knowledge about media practices, as well as to help professionals understand why transparency is an important part of both public relations and journalism.

This research offers an extensive literature review that discusses previous media transparency research. The relationship between public relations and journalism, the changing nature of journalism, and media transparency are also discussed to provide further context for the study, followed by the methodology and results of the study. Finally, a discussion section presents implications of this media transparency research on media practices and public relations in the USA, as well as the state of media transparency in the country.

## 2. The relationship between public relations and journalism

Journalists recognize that public relations plays a vital role as an information subsidy (Gandy, 1982). Phillips (2010) referred to an information subsidy, such as a press release, as “vanilla news,” and then only through investigating and follow-up will value be added to the news. Building on Gandy's (1982) idea of information subsidies, Turk (1985) argued that public relations professionals use information subsidies to influence media content and opinions. Although journalists may see their practice as more “pure” than is public relations, there is no doubt that the two professions need each other to survive (Briggs, 2008). Today, the two professions are at a crossroads as the number of public relations professionals increases and the number of journalists decreases (Sissons, 2012).

As media transitioned into a new age, the relationship between the two professions changed (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2017). This changing relationship has implications for media ethics and transparency. Sissons (2012) found that journalists are not rigorously — or even half-heartedly — fact-checking news releases as they once did — probably due to time and money constraints. Curtin and Rhodenbaugh (2001) noted that journalists rely heavily on press releases for information, partially because it is less costly. Even though journalists' feelings toward public relations might be mixed, they accept public relations practitioners' information because of time pressures, as well (Rim, Ha, & Kiouis, 2013).

Because press releases are one of the cheapest information subsidies and because media outlets are tightening their budgets,

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