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## Book Review

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Davies, Nick, *Flat Earth News*, 2008, London, Chatto & Windus, ISBN-10: 0701181451

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The latest juicy publication joining the debate of ‘news-shaping’ is Nick Davies’ *Flat Earth News*. An award winning investigative journalist himself, Davies turns against his own profession in identifying the many falsehoods and distortions of news reporting in the UK media. Davies accuses UK journalists of freely accepting ready-made PR copy without further checking or criticising, and argues that the modern media has been corrupted to provide a distorted view of the news. This ‘churnalism’ he argues is largely due to time constraints and an increased work volume in UK newsrooms. Backing up his claim to a certain degree are a number of parallel investigations by a team of researchers from Cardiff University.

The domestic news content of five UK newspapers was studied in order to establish the extent to which journalists depend on public relations and wire services. However the shocking results that emerged (80% of stories were identified to consist either completely or partly of PR material) have to be handled with care. Firstly, it is not entirely clear what these percentages consist of in the first place. Secondly looking at the newspapers he mainly refers to, it is important to note that *The Independent*, for example, has more than doubled its journalistic staff over the past decade, *The Times* has added 100 journalists to their team and similar things can be said about *The Telegraph*, so the increased work and decreased time factors seem questionable. Admittedly local papers do appear to have a tough time struggling for staff and budgets and are made out to be the prime carriers of ready-made news, a claim that is highlighted by an extract of one reporter’s diary.

However, the vast number of stories and the tracing of their origins make for explosive reading and Davies certainly has the repertoire for a strong case. Some of the most memorable included the Millennium Bug, an entirely fabricated brainchild of the PR industry, and the coverage surrounding the Nat West Three whose press profile, turned in the hands of their PR adviser, from ‘dodgy business

men' to 'victims of the US legal system' as they were denied trial in the UK. Davies' main case study relates to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the way PR has made him out to be the most evil man in the world. Stories about al-Zarqawi dying (more than once) and being linked to numerous terrorist acts were identified as untrue and a complete creation of the 'news factory'. As one critic points out: 'the fact that he eventually did collaborate with Bin Laden could almost be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy since he had already been classed a top al-Qaida terrorist by the press.'<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless despite his stern allegations, in a recent debate held at the University of Westminster arguing for the motion '*The growth of public relations is threatening the integrity of the press*', Davies was accused of applying PR in its most basic sense himself, using the occasion as a means to promote his book. Although he and his fellow debater Roy Greenslade lost their argument against Lord Bell and Phil Hall it has to be said that *Flat Earth News* is a passionately argued eye opener and dubious findings notwithstanding will no doubt be a catalyser for future research in the field.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Anonymous (2008) 'Book Review: Flat Earth News by Nick Davies', available at <http://www.septicisle.info/2008/02/book-review-flat-earth-news-by-nick.html#links> (accessed 16 June 2008).