

Book Review: *Flat Earth News*



An award-winning journalist, Mr Nick Davies **(picture)**, has turned against his profession in exposing the falsehoods and distortions of news reporting in the UK media. In his recent book, *Flat Earth News*, Nick claims that journalists depended on readymade press-releases and wired-agencies to report without further investigations.

IPRS Council Member and Managing Director of Redshoe Communications, Ms Kathy O'Brien, took a quick peek at Nick's book and shares her views.

Journalism has given way to 'churnalism', according to *Flat Earth News* author Nick Davies. With this change, the world can no longer rely on the media as seekers of 'the truth'.

Churnalism?? You would be forgiven for not recognising the label; but our profession cannot deny knowledge of the concept. It is, according to Nick, '...journalists who are no longer out gathering news but who are reduced instead to passive processes of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories, whether real event or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or false.'

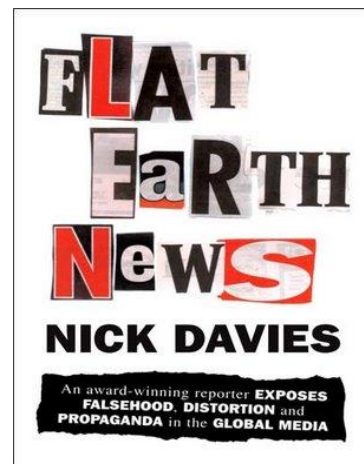
This is the setup for an impassioned critique of the media by a 30-year journalist and author of numerous other 'truth uncovered' books. Nick argues his points in a way that cannot be ignored. His text is an important read for any of us concerned about the role of PR in society. We may not like

what he has to say – and we can certainly refute some of his assertions and conclusions – but we dismiss his thesis at our peril.

The author has researched his topic to an impressive extent. He charts the course of change as technology enabled newspapers to break the hold of printing unions, reduce staff and dramatically cut costs in the 1980s and 1990s. This has resulted in deskbound journalists with such high quotas for story-filing; they have almost no time for checking facts, let alone investigating their own stories.

Enter Public Relations. Researchers at Cardiff University who were commissioned by Nick analysed four quality daily newspapers in the UK over a two-week period to determine the source of these articles. In Nick's parlance, this is what they found:

'The Cardiff research suggests that at least 80% of the news product of the best and most respected newspapers in Britain contains second-hand material, most of it unchecked, much of it provided by people who are at best unreliable and at worst manipulative. Something fundamental has shifted.'



While the UK is clearly Nick's home ground, he sweeps through other large markets and also pauses to consider the role of global news agencies such as Reuters. He pays his respects to the big 'suppliers', but readers may begin to resist him as he makes statements such as 'Reuters was not concerned with the truth'. Nick seems to believe there is one truth in a story,

and it's the journalist's job to find and report it. Some may question whether there is such a thing as one truth.

Nick's lavish use of the abbreviation PR – never in a positive light – can be painful to take in. He cites the most unflattering examples to support his case – from Enron to Edward Bernays; promotion of women smoking cigarettes as 'torches of freedom'. He quotes proposals by PR consultancies (naming the firms and their clients, yes), calling their recommendations 'the creation of pseudo-events' and condemning most of all the category of issues management. A lay reader would be hard pressed to emerge from this book with any positive ideas on Public Relations.

It is this fact that makes *Flat Earth News* required reading for serious PR practitioners. Its condemnation of Public Relations is wide and deep.

Does Nick present a solution to this unacceptable system? No. And for that he could be criticised. Nonetheless, the questions he raises are complex and legitimate.

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