

# Manipulating the message: How powerful forces shape the news

Cecil Rosner

Dundurn Press, 2023

Paperback, e-book, and audio-book



LISTEN

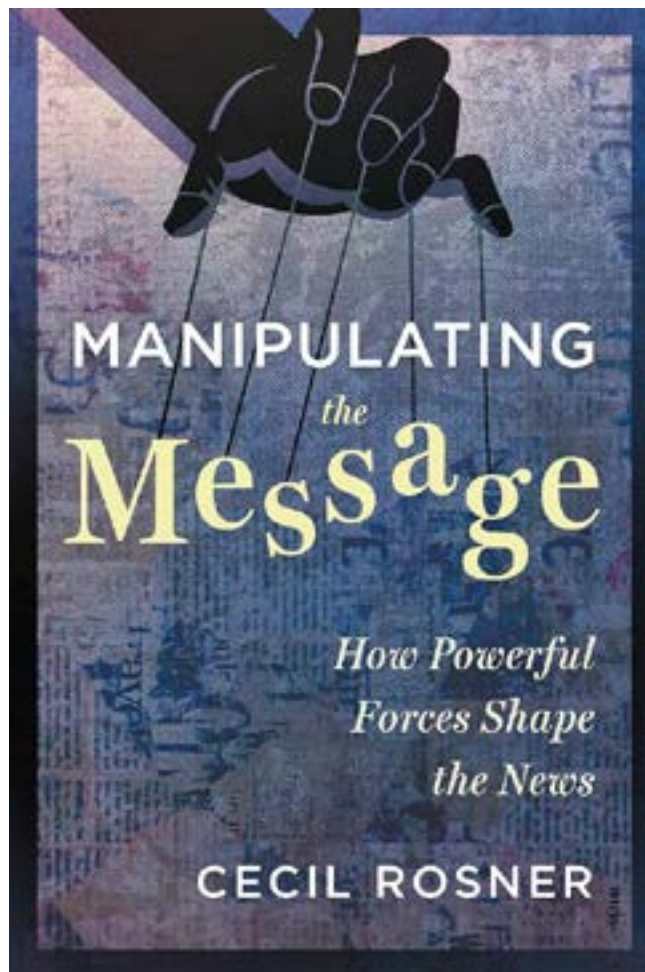
*Rosner's book is a warning to us all: support journalism and media literacy or live with the consequences.*

## Review by Tracy Sherlock

When I first started working at a daily Canadian newspaper, my job as a copy editor entailed two tasks: writing headlines and proofreading stories for typos. It got busy at times, but it was easy to focus, and I didn't have to worry too much because, after me, a chief copy editor—known as the slot—would review what I wrote, sometimes sending it back to me so I could see what he corrected.

As the years went by, that job became much more complicated. Copy editors had to do much more than simply write headlines and proofread. They had to post stories to the web, do substantive editing, match stories to photos, monitor online comments and more. Sometimes one copy editor was the only person to read a story before it was published.

The newsroom—like the Canadian journalism sector as a whole—was shrinking. The company encouraged buyouts, but as each person left, their positions were not replaced. It was a great time



## ARTICLE INFO

**APA citation:** Sherlock, T. (2024). [Review of the book *Manipulating the Message: How Powerful Forces Shape the News*, by Cecil Rosner]. *Facts & Frictions: Emerging Debates, Pedagogies, and Practices in Contemporary Journalism*, 3(2), 76-78. <http://doi.org/10.22215/ff/v3.i2.02>

Open Access / CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

of opportunity for taking on new roles, but it also meant each journalist left in the newsroom had to do more.

At one point, I was doing the jobs of three former full-time people—the letters editor, the books editor and the business section web editor. By the time I left, I was the education reporter and the books editor.

*Media are under attack not just financially by tech giants, but also politically.*

As the number of journalists across Canada has shrunk, the number of people practicing public relations has exploded. Journalist Cecil Rosner, in his new book *Manipulating the Message: How Powerful Forces Shape the News*, writes that in 1991, there were 23,780 people in public relations and communications, a number that jumped to 158,595 over 30 years. During that same period, the number of reporters fell from just 13,470 to 11,360 (p. 18).

Why does that matter? It matters because journalists are ethically mandated to serve the public and use a discipline of verification, while people doing public relations and communications are mandated to serve whoever pays their salary. The two professions often work closely together, and I'm not criticizing public relations in any way, but if the public doesn't know the difference between PR and journalism, or gets most of their news from social media, the truth can be hard to discern.

Misinformation, which is false information, and disinformation, which is false information spread with intent to deceive, are both rampant on the Internet and on social media, and division in society is growing as a result. There are polls for everything, commissioned by organizations with agendas and complete with leading questions designed to elicit certain answers. Social media influencers have followings journalists can only dream of but are not trained or even necessarily concerned with presenting unbiased information.

Media are under attack not just financially by tech giants, but also politically. Donald Trump, who Rosner writes about in *Manipulating the Message*, [wrote on Twitter](#) in 2017 that the news

media “is the enemy of the American people” (Grynbaum, 2017). That's a dangerous message because democracy depends on an independent, strong press, but as the media shrinks, the ability to manipulate the public grows.

Rosner, a journalist for more than 45 years, tackles all the above in his new book, which should be required reading for all journalists and aspiring journalists, but also for the public, who need to consciously develop their media literacy.

Rosner was an executive producer of *The Fifth Estate*, a CBC News investigative program and has won many awards including the Michener Award, which is Canada's top award for public service journalism. He wrote the 2008 book *Behind the Headlines: A History of Investigative Journalism in Canada*.

In *Manipulating the Message*, Rosner brings his decades of experience to bear witness to the various and many ways different people and organizations try to manipulate journalists. He has chapters on corporate interests, think tanks with biased agendas and political spin doctors. Because newsrooms have been shrinking and, in some cases, have even closed, there is “a low level of scrutiny and more opportunities for politicians to mislead the public,” Rosner writes.

Tactics he describes include politicians using statistics to make achievements look better and to downplay problems, failing to answer questions directly by relying on talking points and—the worst of all—sending out bad news late on a Friday afternoon when it will likely get little attention. One more insidious tactic is that of leaking nuggets of news to favoured journalists as a trial balloon to test public opinion. Because the government uses unnamed sources to do this, it also erodes trust in journalists.

Another tactic came to light during the SNC Lavalin scandal in Canada, when then-Attorney-General Jody Wilson-Raybould resigned her position, saying the Prime Minister and others close to him pressured her to give the company a deal that would allow them to avoid a criminal trial.

Wilson-Raybould [told a House of Commons justice committee](#) that the government would line up people to write opinion articles to submit to news outlets supporting the idea of giving SNC Lavalin a deal (Houpt, 2019). Publications often run these types of articles, written by “experts” to explore

different topics of public interest. They are usually unsolicited by news outlets, who don't usually compensate the writers. Raybould's comments show a perfect example of how the media—and therefore the public—can be manipulated.

“...an instructive case in lobbying, influence, and spin...”


Rosner discusses the SNC Lavalin affair, calling it “an instructive case in lobbying, influence, and spin, and how powerful forces try to keep journalists and the public in the dark” (p. 72).

It's not only the government that can attempt to manipulate the media, it's also at times the police, the military, think tanks and other institutions, all of which Rosner explores in separate chapters in the book.

How can we fix it?

Rosner gives several suggestions in the final chapter of his book, beginning with sharpening our media literacy skills. Learn to read, watch and listen with skepticism, and to question the status quo, especially if it is perpetuating colonial, racist or sexist views. He encourages the public to support media by subscribing and gives a shout out to new media start-ups like *The Tyee*, *Canada's National Observer* and *The Narwhal* for the

non-traditional stories they cover, and their business model based on public support rather than advertising.

Journalists are working harder than ever before—they're doing the jobs of several people at once in a world spinning with misinformation and disinformation, trying to report the truth in the interest of ordinary people and democracy. Rosner's book is a warning to us all: support journalism and media literacy or live with the consequences. 

---

**Tracy Sherlock** is a freelance journalist and a journalism instructor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Twitter: [@tracysherlock](https://twitter.com/tracysherlock)

---

## REFERENCES

- Grynbaum, M. M. (2017, Feb. 17). Trump calls the news media the 'enemy of the American people'. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/business/trump-calls-the-news-media-the-enemy-of-the-people.html>
- Haupt, S. (2019, Feb. 28). 'Write op-eds saying that what she is doing is proper.' What the Wilson-Raybould testimony reveals about the politics of newspaper opinion pieces. *Globe and Mail*. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-what-the-wilson-raybould-testimony-reveals-about-the-matrix-of/>
- Rosner, C. (2023). *Manipulating the message: How powerful forces Shape the news*. Dundurn Press.

---

FACTS AND FRICTIONS is published by J-Schools Canada, Canada's national association for post-secondary journalism research and education. All content is Open Access and available via J-Source at [www.j-source.ca](http://www.j-source.ca), Canada's leading online source for journalism news and resources. For further information visit [www.j-schoolscanada.ca](http://www.j-schoolscanada.ca).

FAIT ET FRICTIONS est publié par Écoles-J Canada, l'association nationale du Canada pour la recherche et l'éducation en journalisme postsecondaire. Tout le contenu est en libre accès et disponible via J-Source à [www.j-source.ca](http://www.j-source.ca), la principale source en ligne au Canada d'actualités et de ressources journalistiques. Pour plus d'informations, visitez [www.ecolesjcanada.ca](http://www.ecolesjcanada.ca).