The rapid development and expansion of modern communication systems have stimulated a great deal of activity both at the academic and more popular levels of interest. A large part of academic and the greater part of popular interest has focused on what has generally been referred to as "mass communications". This is true even if the recent upswing in popular activity with regard to Citizen's Band radio is allowed for, and despite the apparent proliferation (on television dramas) of well-heeled types making telephone calls from the plush interior of a limousine on its way to the airport or other destination. Conceivably, these two instances may represent the class extremes of this type of activity. While both radio and the telephone have been around for a long time, technological developments have extended the utility derived from the original discovery, producing a variety of communication systems which have considerable impact on modes of social interaction. Even if the consequences of such impact are not always easily assessed. Both the "good buddy" and the mobile "hooked-in" businessman are creations of a new technology, but we're not quite sure what they both might mean, or whether their existence is of great significance.

This article will examine a particular communications facility which has been around for some time, but with which the general public is not likely to be familiar. While the operation of this facility is prosaic enough, when viewed from the perspective adopted in the opening paragraph, it begins to assume larger, albeit somewhat indistinct and insidious dimensions. We refer to what are variously known as Business Wires, Press Relations Wires or Public Relations Wires which enjoy an "inside track" with the media and thereby reinforce the powerful.

In practice these are often all one and the same thing, although it will be necessary to distinguish these wires
from others with which the public is more familiar. These latter are, of course, the news agencies which operate regionally, nationally or internationally, maintaining bureaus and correspondents in strategic locations for the purpose of gathering information which is then disseminated as "news" to subscribing media outlets. AP, UPI, Reuter are all familiar names and, in Canada, Canadian Press.

As a result of their operations both print and broadcast media receive news items which their own reporting staff are physically incapable of gathering. These news agencies maintain themselves by the sale or exchange of these items to the various media. The selling arrangements may be varied, but the subscribing media outlet has within its operating facility, in its newsroom, a teletype receiver which is on line to the particular news agency network, and records transmissions sent over it. The power of these news agencies is, of course, quite considerable. Their version of events, announced on so many radio frequencies and appearing on so many front pages, informs us all. A great deal of stress is thus placed on the objectivity of their reporters and their intermediate editing staff, although, rightly or wrongly, a number of groups believe they don't get a fair shake from these august institutions.

These groups believe that for different reasons the news agencies are not doing as great a job as they would like everyone to think. For instance, from a political and economic point of view, many "third world" nations have felt that the ideological perspective of the western-based international news agencies has contributed to giving many of these countries a bad name in the press. It is felt that, deliberately or not, much of the reporting done on the "third world" is unresponsive and unsympathetic to the aims and aspirations and particular problems of the governments and peoples of these areas. As a result, some action is being taken to set up an independent news agency which would hopefully redress this problem.

On the other hand, closer to home, some groups feel that these news agencies and journalists in general are guilty of promoting a negative image of their activities, or of omitting to report adequately on what these groups see as significant and newsworthy aspects of their activities. They feel that many journalists are often irresponsible or uninformed when they do investigate these activities. It is this group, that of big business or certain sections of big business, which has been most instrumental in the development of the Business/PR wire. It is, however, by no means the only group...
which is somewhat suspicious of the news agencies and the media in general, and which today finds in the Business/PR wire a controllable agent.

Thus when in the late 50's an enterprising individual conceived of the novel idea of acting as an intermediary between business and the media, an intermediary which promised certain efficiencies and regularities, he was laying the foundations of what is today PR Newswire, a subsidiary of Western Union and, as far as can be ascertained, the largest of these Wires in the United States. This individual was fulfilling a wish, and to understand this and the acceptance of its provision via the Wire service, we can with the benefit of hindsight survey the general trends.

The Business/PR Wire is in the technical jargon a form of medio-communication, as is the telephone, CB radio and regular news agency wire. Blake and Haroldsen describe it as "an intermediate level of communication (medio: from the Latin meaning middle) that has characteristics of both interpersonal and mass communication". (A Taxonomy of Concepts in Communication, Hastings House Publishers, New York, 1975, p.32).

Technologically, the development and refinement of radio teletype provided a great stimulus to the spread of printed communication. As both the availability and quality of these teletype facilities increased, the more economically feasible it became for teletype networks to be instituted by large organizations for the high speed communication of data of all sorts relevant to their requirements. Big business, for example, was increasingly aware of the symbiosis of its size and communication facilities. As big business became increasingly conscious of its public image, by virtue of its own growth as a modern corporation, with the complexity of its operations and the remoteness of its ownership and management, the notion of the corporate citizen was born. Public relations was institutionalized.

It is useful to note that commercial establishments have always depended upon the broadcast media to spread the good word on their stock of items for sale. The corporate citizen came along and existed at all levels of the process of production and distribution, in the fields of accumulation and investment of surplus, etc. Some existed as vertically integrated entities, others as diversified conglomerates. While the average housewife is not in the market for a ten-ton truck, the manufacturer or utiliser of such a vehicle nonetheless seems to find it necessary to inform her of its
benevolence. The ethic of growth and large size and its equation with progress is often promulgated by way of advertising. Such and such a company, the television set informs us, is "putting Canada's resources to work" or "putting Canadians to work", although the latter claim must of recent times seem questionable.

Communications systems are a vital and integral part of corporate activity within individual entities, between them in their business relations and finally as a link to the society at large. The PR wire constitutes for many of these corporations that link to the larger society although, it should be made clear, public relations encompasses a great deal more than the writing and dissemination of press releases. The Business/PR wire is simply one more tool in the kit of public relations practitioners - albeit an important and often vital one.

Additionaly, and particularly in its function as a "business" wire, such networks perform an important service to the financial community. Investors, both individual and institutional, have an ongoing interest in the performance of individual companies of all descriptions, even of quite small ones. Thus news items related to a company's activities and performance that have traditionally been of no great interest to the public in general (and thus often ignored by the news agencies) are of considerable interest to the investor both as an indicator of the direction of movement of its listed stock on the exchanges, and as a potential indicator of the trend in its particular area of the market.

The Stock Exchanges themselves have come to place considerable emphasis on the requirements of member companies to make full and timely disclosure of important company news and in a manner which facilitates a widespread dissemination of such information. To this end the facilities of the "business" wire are often recommended, since speed and simultaneous transmission to media are its essential attributes. Business Wires carry regularly such company announcements as routine quarterly earning statements, announcements of changes in corporate structure, of acquisitions or intent to acquire or merge, of stock offerings, of debt financing, the opening or closing of business facilities, the hiring, firing and retiring of key executives, etc. Quite clearly the "business" wire provides an information service to the financial community while engendering a consumer and investor environment.
While it is true that some news agencies (e.g. Dow Jones and Reuter) do provide an exclusive financial wire service, the logistics of such operations do involve some limitations on the scope and extent of their service to the media at large. Since, as was mentioned previously, these services represent a cost to the media outlet, only the larger media seem inclined to incur these costs. Media outlets on the "business" wires, however, receive their information at no cost to themselves in hard dollars and cents – although it would provide their financial editors with some additional work, as opposed to simply selecting items off the Dow Jones or Reuter wire. In turn, the "business" wires often feed the news agency. The simultaneous nature of their transmissions ensures there is no time advantage to be enjoyed when two or more news agencies are in competition. The agency which most efficiently edits and transmits on its own wires significant information received from a "business" wire is most likely to keep its members or clients happy. In the best tradition of capitalist society, competition is the name of the game, and the "business" wire plays its part. The close relationship of business propaganda and the press is evident.

The specific operations of the Business/PR wire is, as mentioned earlier, prosaic enough. Basically it provides teletype transmission of information into the newsrooms of media. To this end it organizes a network of transmitting and receiving equipment, leasing facilities for such a network from (in Canada) such communication giants as Bell or CN-CP. This network and the staff to operate, administer and promote the enterprise constitute its major costs. To obtain its revenues, the Business/PR wire sells the service to interested organizations. It has been already mentioned that business organizations are natural clients for reasons both of the requirements of the financial community and the requirements of public relations. While individual organizations may make only a handful of announcements in a given year, they are assured of a facility which is most efficient at ensuring the maximum effectiveness of such announcements without these organizations themselves having to upkeep an expensive communications facility for such occasional purposes.

It is important to stress at this point the fact that the Business/PR wire cannot and does not guarantee that information it transmits on its network will actually be used by the media at all. Individual media may or may not decide to use such an information item in a broadcast or print it in a newspaper. It may decide to use it in quite
a different form from that in which it is presented over the wire. The great selling point of the Business/PR is that information will get to the attention of editors or news directors, and it will get there in the form of the source's own composition, unchanged and unedited by any other intermediary. It is for this reason that many organizations feel it necessary to use the Business/PR wire even when they are assured coverage of a particular story by a news agency. They feel that, quite apart from possible inaccuracies in a news agency story, such copy will inevitably highlight certain aspects to the neglect of others. It is hoped that individual editors in possession of the organization's official announcement via a Business/PR Wire might be inclined to include more "positive" elements of the story when they go to press or on the air should these elements have been neglected in the news agency story. They substitute their own angle or slant for the news agency's, and they do not transmit "negative" (critical) news of themselves or play up significant social implications.

In practice, from this writer's own observations, newspapers, in presenting such stories, simply state that "a company spokesman said..." or, "in a press release the company said...". But even this is an improvement, from the point of view of such an organization, over a strictly interpretational report. However, from paper to paper the practice varies. On occasion one is able to see a press release reappearing almost verbatim in some organs. Senator Keith Davey's injunction to "never, never, NEVER print a press release intact" goes by the board. (Special Senate Committee on the Mass Media, 1970, Vol. 1, p.258).

Since it is merely transmitting the information of others to the media, the Business/PR Wire employs a certain format in transmission. Each item is addressed to the attention of a particular category of editor (financial, news, etc.) and carries at its conclusion the name of the source together with the name of a contact with that person's telephone number. The latter is for reference. In the event that an editor would like to have further information on the item he need only call the company official, PR or information person whose name appears there. And hopefully he will not call some rival or critical sources to mitigate their news managing.

The Business/PR Wire employs no reporting staff of its own. It does often have, however, on its staff, a person
or persons with journalistic or relevant experience who can be of some advice to those of its clients whose resources do not permit the hiring of professional PR people. This is also a means of quality control, as it ensures that the copy it handles is accurate and comprehensible and does not constitute a burden on the editor at the receiving end. Not unnaturally, the Business/PR Wire develops in terms of human resources an expertise and efficiency within its own sphere of operations which greatly facilitates its clients.

While in the U.S.A. there are more than half-a-dozen individual Business/PR Wires in operation, in Canada, at the present time, there are only two. Their operations reflect the forces at work in Canadian society. The more extensive of the two networks is CANADA NEWS-WIRE, with transmitting offices in Montreal, Toronto and Calgary, and a representative office in Ottawa. The other is TELBEC, which has extensive, possibly complete coverage of media within the province of Quebec, with additional facilities in some areas of the Maritimes, notably New Brunswick. Canada News-Wire's (CNW) facilities cover the major Canadian cities from coast to coast, including St. John's, Newfoundland - i.e. the major daily newspapers in all and other major media outlets in many. Additionally it runs into many other Ontario cities and offers close to saturation coverage of media in Toronto. Both these wire services have extended over time and in response to the growth of their business.

While Telbec in Quebec has benefited by carrying a large quantity of informational material on behalf of the Quebec government (governments past and present), the mix of traffic carried on Canada News-Wire is more varied and reflects fairly well the key elements of 20th century Canadian federalism. That is to say the voices of big business, big government and big labour chatter with remarkable frequency over its wires. Not exclusively, however, as cultural, entertainment, civic and community organizations make use of its services, particularly of its Toronto network. The speed with which the entire press can be contacted makes it ideal for calls to press conferences, notification of upcoming events, etc., and is a considerable improvement over time consuming and repetitive telephone calls, hand deliveries, postal service, etc.

Both Canada News-Wire and Telbec attest to being Canadian by providing translation services for wire material for delivery to the different French and English media.
Public Relations Wire Does Not Cater To The Lay Public

To return at this point to the concerns expressed in our opening paragraph, we can see that receiving its original impetus from the requirements of the financial and business community, the Business/PR wire has developed into an institution which caters for the needs or wishes of a variety of interests. It has become an institution largely if not unequivocally accepted by both its 'publics' (to use a public relations term). These are both the media and its client organizations but does not include the general or lay public which does not know of its existence. (The PR wire does not publicize the PR wire).

The growth of the Business/PR Wire attests to the support of the latter. Some members of the media remain classically skeptical but are not indifferent to the informational value and the wide variety of sources of material carried by the Business/PR Wire. Very often its rapidity of delivery improves the traditional methods by which the media are accustomed to receiving material of routine but important nature and this efficiency convinces many an editor or news director.

To continue to convince its publics, the Business/PR Wire must constantly tailor its services to fit emerging requirements. Expansion into non-financial media, both papers which formally carried little financial news as well as electronic media, carries simultaneously a stimulus and a response which the alert wire operators are quick to respond to. Business and financial news may be carried more often and on previously indifferent media outlets. Financial papers may be more responsive to non-financial material or may carry features on the social implications of developments within the business community. (These are the optimistic speculations of a democrat who objects to the compartmentalization of life's necessary activities).

More realistically, it is apparent that the Business/PR Wire is one more tool at the service of large organizations which generally have the financial resources to make adequate use of it. When debate takes place on matters of public interest and importance (and this is a continuing debate, now more specific, now less), it is the large and powerful organizations which are best placed to contribute their pieces and to dominate the consciousness of the people who manage and report the news. This is not to say that all such people do not have the interests of the average Joe at heart. Rather, they cannot be depended upon to adequately understand and express these interests when in our society expression of the wishes of ordinary people is so distorted.
by intermediate organizations that the community interest often seems to be irreconcilable, if any sense can at all be made of it.

The common mass has no direct input. With the volume of informational material the media has daily to process, even the wire copy of the Manufacturer's Association press release or the Labour Congress statement may make a quick trip from the teletype roll to the waste basket, but they at least have had the advantage of being considered. My own protest, my 'strong letter' about what's happening in my community, won't get further than the newsroom waste basket's counterpart in the reception area. My general interest is quickly lost in the superior impact of the large and special interest groups which are supposed to arrive at a consensus on my behalf.

In this regard it is interesting to note that there appears to be considerable mobility between the ranks of the media and the files of public relations. Personnel often move outward and upward from the former into the more affluent positions of the latter. With this continuing transfer of skill the intermediaries of the Business/PR Wire is the vehicle for a deeper and more insidious effect of large organizations on the information reaching the media. The parameters of such an influence are not easily drawn and cannot really become part of this paper. Ultimately such a study would have to include the whole theory and practice of public relations itself. In the meantime we can be sure that we are being affected; that, in some quarters, the influencing of information is constantly being refined.

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