

Jack O'Dwyer, newsletter publisher and 'soul and conscience' of PR industry, dies at 85

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The cause was complications from pulmonary fibrosis, said his son, John O'Dwyer.

He was relentless in his reporting, and his opinionated views sometimes infuriated the people he wrote about. But his newsletter, monthly magazine, directories and annual rankings of the country's leading public relations firms became essential reading among PR professionals and were credited with making the field more ethical and transparent.

Crusty and gruff, Mr. O'Dwyer never worked a day in the polished, image-conscious field that he covered. Instead, he saw PR as his beat — as if he were covering the Pentagon or organized crime — and sought to keep the industry honest.

“Jack took great pride in being an old-school, shoe-leather reporter who chases down stories,” said Kevin McCauley, who worked alongside Mr. O’Dwyer for almost 30 years and is the current editor of the newsletter. “Public relations just happened to be what Jack was covering. If it hadn’t been PR, it would have been something else.”

No public relations professional, Mr. O'Dwyer believed, should be the mere mouthpiece of a corporation, government or unscrupulous client. Instead, he viewed the field as an adjunct of journalism, with PR professionals and reporters working hand in hand to inform the public.

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He outlined three principles that should guide anyone in PR. The first, “Always seek the truth,” asked public relations workers to insist on integrity and honesty in themselves and the companies they represented.

The second, “Always speak your mind,” reminded PR professionals that they had a responsibility to provide conscientious advice to their clients — and to steer them away from any improper behavior.

The final principle, “Always respond to the media,” would seem self-evident, except that it is increasingly ignored by businesses and government officials who try to shield their actions and policies from scrutiny.

“We’re in Iraq because of PR,” Mr. O’Dwyer said in 2007, referring to the false intelligence reports that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Deceptive PR “gets people to jump through hoops you don’t know you’re jumping through.”

Even as public relations firms aim to cast their clients in the rosiest light, Mr. O’Dwyer believed they should never compromise their credibility.

“If people recognize something as PR, then they dismiss it as just PR,” he told the New York Times in 1984. “It’s the mathematics of lying. If you lie one-one-hundredth of 1 percent of the time, you’re still a liar.”

In 1970, Mr. O’Dwyer began ranking public relations firms by size and income, requiring them to disclose their financial records. He exposed unethical practices by PR firms and by journalists, including the use of corporate-supplied videos in news reports. He grilled executives whose companies represented dubious clients.

“Some people don’t like him,” Bob Dilenschneider, the founder of a New York PR firm, told the Connecticut Post. “But that’s because he does his job.”

Mr. O’Dwyer deplored the trend of small firms’ being swallowed up by conglomerates. He relished his role as a troublemaker and had long-running feuds with the industry’s largest trade group, the Public Relations Society of America, and with the publisher of a rival newsletter.

“We’re Bolsheviks over here!” he told one job-seeker, [Jon Gingerich](#), who is now editor of the company’s monthly magazine.

John Robert O’Dwyer was born Aug. 13, 1933, in Bridgeport, Conn. His father was a factory worker, his mother a homemaker.

Mr. O’Dwyer spent a year working for an aircraft manufacturer before graduating from the University of Connecticut in 1956.

At the Bridgeport Telegram, he covered the police beat before moving to the old New York Journal-American, where he wrote about the advertising business. He later spent four years in the New York bureau of the Chicago Tribune.

After launching his own publications, Mr. O'Dwyer always led a lean operation from offices on Manhattan's Madison Avenue. Yet, with an editorial staff of only four or five, he reached more than 30,000 PR professionals across the country. He charged hundreds of dollars for a subscription to his specialized newsletter, which was typewritten and published on cheap paper.

"My father referred to it as 'the rag,' " his son said in an interview. "It was very basic and stayed that way until the early 2000s."

A monthly magazine, also called O'Dwyer's, has been published since 1986.

Mr. O'Dwyer continued to write for his publications until this year. His son is now the publisher of all of the company's titles, and his daughter is marketing director.

Survivors include his wife of 54 years, the former Lucille Spinelli of New York and Westhampton, N.Y.; two children, John O'Dwyer of Falls Church, Va., and Christine O'Dwyer, of Vienna, Va.; a brother; and a sister.

Mr. O'Dwyer was nothing if not outspoken and quirky. He left notes in the office on how to use the fax machine and how to defrost the company refrigerator. His meetings with PR bigwigs sometimes degenerated into shouting matches.

At one lunch, Mr. O'Dwyer and the chief executive of a major firm stood up at the table and were nose to nose before the food was served.

"I was placing odds on who would be the first to keel over from a heart attack," McCauley, the current O'Dwyer's newsletter editor, wrote in an [online remembrance](#).

The executive angrily stormed out of the restaurant, leaving his assistant behind to smooth things over with McCauley and Mr. O'Dwyer.

"The only thing left for the three of us to do," McCauley wrote, was to "wait for the food and then eat. Best of all: Jack and I shared the entree ordered by our missing lunch partner."

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