

Embargoes, Exclusives & Facebook's Oversight Board



Peter Himler, Founding Principal, [Flatiron Communications LLC](#)

Journalists bristle at the notion of being manipulated by PR people as if they're some cog in a company's marketing communications program. Some of their biggest gripes include the PR person's request to see a reporter's questions in advance or review his/her story copy prior to publication. More often than not, it's the PR person's simple presence during, or "management" of the interview itself that raises eyebrows. God forbid two PR pros should accompany the client on a media interview!

Recently, Media Twitter erupted with the news that the PR reps for Facebook's esteemed "[Oversight Board](#)" had the audacity to offer select reporters news of its recent deliberation over the de-platforming of the former U.S. "president." The bone of

contention: the offer was made to select reporters on an embargoed basis.

Here's what Vivian Schiller had to say:

The Markup editor Julia Angwin, a Wall Street Journal alumnus, tweeted out this thread:

I found several of the sub-tweets from this well-regarded and accomplished journalist especially telling:

"First, to address the obvious question: yes, embargoes are a PR manipulation tactic."

"Journalists are vastly outnumbered and outspent by companies with sophisticated PR teams that play the embargo game (& many other games)"

"That's one reason we don't chase scoops & embargoes [@themarkup](#) – because pre-release news is not the battlefield we want to play on."

"We pursue stories that we think would not get written if we didn't write them. We collect data that we think would not get collected if we did not collect it. We think that is journalism's highest calling. "/end

Personally, I think the decision to offer an embargo has less to do with manipulation, which admittedly has some validity, and more to do with giving the typical beleaguered reporter sufficient time to evaluate the story's merit. Few PR-suggested story ideas have what it takes for a reporter to drop everything on which he or she is working.

Nonetheless, PR people often are privy to actual news emanating from their clients. By giving the journalist 2-3 weeks' notice, with an agreement to hold the story for a certain date and time, it satisfies both sides of the PR-

journalist media equation. The journalist has time to consider the story and the PR person can feel good about providing the breathing room. (Hint: do not send an unsolicited embargoed news release.)

In the tech media space – where Julia developed her journalism chops – it is not unusual, and maybe SOP, for reporters to accept and honor embargoed stories. It's no coincidence that stories for Apple's latest device break at the exact same moment across the technology mediasphere. In other words, the news value of the story and the importance of the source often dictate the latitude that [PR](#) people have when it comes to offering up an embargo.

In the case of Facebook's Oversight Board, which is comprised mainly of academics, the editor of one of the news site's offered the story under embargo, Benjamin Wittes of [LawFare blog](#), defended his reporter [Evelyn Douek](#)'s acceptance thereof.

Specifically, he wrote:

Evelyn received the Facebook Oversight Board's decisions this week on an embargoed basis the evening before they were made public. She did so with the knowledge and approval of her editors at [@lawfareblog](#), myself included.

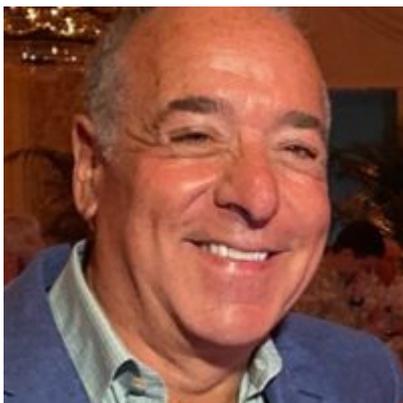
No conditions as to her writing or the substance of what she might say were placed on her receipt of the material by the Oversight Board or Facebook. And Evelyn has no financial relationship of any kind with either the Oversight Board or with Facebook—and never has had one.

Receiving material on an embargoed basis is a perfectly normal journalistic practice. In this case it allowed Evelyn to produce a hugely informative piece of analysis which we were able to release shortly after the material's release."

As for exclusives, this tactic would be one that journalists

could very well see as manipulative. Most PR peeps believe that an offer of an exclusive makes an otherwise so-so story idea more compelling, and therefore more likely to be reported by the recipient of the exclusive offer. Mostly it doesn't and they aren't.

On the other side of the coin, many journalists insist on being the first to break a news story and will demand exclusivity from the lowly PR person. Like embargoes, exclusives do have a place in both the journalist's and [PR](#) person's toolbox. The propensity (and ability) to use these tools, again, may be determined by the news value of the story and the gravity of the newsmaker.



About the Author: Peter Himler is founding principal of Flatiron Communications LLC, a NYC-based PR and digital media consultancy that helps emerging and established organizations capitalize on the latest communications technology and strategies. Flatiron offers its clients traditional and digital media engagement, communications training, crisis management, social media programming, influencer and content marketing, and event activation strategies.

Prior to forming Flatiron, with its first client The New York Times, Himler played senior leadership roles in the media practices of Edelman, Burson-Marsteller, Cohn & Wolfe, and Hill and Knowlton. He started his career in the New York entertainment PR firm Zarem Inc. His clients range from digital start-ups to large corporations.

In addition to running Flatiron, Himler has written for Forbes on the intersection of media, technology and marketing, a topic on which he's spoken at The Web Summit and Collision

conferences. He also founded, writes for, and edits the Medium publication "Adventures in Consumer Technology" with its 48,000 followers. He can be found often on Twitter, LinkedIn and WhatsApp, and, occasionally on Tik Tok.

Himler serves as president of the Publicity Club of New York, is active with the New York Tech Meetup, and chairs the Marketing Advisory Council for Tufts University from which he holds a B.A. in Political Science and French. He and his wife Barbara reside in New York City and are parents to three exceptional sons.