

Bad smell at the back of the cave

I want to pay tribute to Anna Rawhiti-Connell for revealing the shadowy side of what she did for a decade.

You probably won't know her. I do only through a *Stuff* story telling us one in 10 people don't feel great about their jobs, that what they do is "socially useless". They include Anna, who is what's called a "corporate communications specialist". Or was.

Anna chucked her job because she came to see it as a dark art, with some within its realm talking of selling their souls. "There were days when I wished I was a plumber," she said. "A lot of what you are doing feels like weasel work."

This is relevant to Taranaki because we have them here. Most big Taranaki companies and local government bodies employ PR people to handle communications with the public and the media. Especially the media.

I make no claims to higher moral ground. I'm nothing more than a trained gossip, albeit a necessary evil. Journalism sprang from cave-dwelling days when someone had to go to the back of the tunnel to see what was causing a bad smell.

As a counter, PR eventuated when societies formed entities with leaders, many of them despots who needed to convince people they were nice guys who had their subjects' best interests at heart.

I found from working in Auckland, Wellington and here that most PR operatives try to be helpful, but sometimes they overstep the mark, usually at their employer's behest.

During research I did for an article about New Plymouth's water supply, a senior New Plymouth District Council PR operative baby-sat me whenever I interviewed anyone from NPDC, even employees with whom I've built a relationship of trust and who understood they would see what I wrote from the interview before it was published (for technical accuracy).

I had a chance to complain about that at a social function staged by Mayor Neil Holdom for local media people. However, after he gave a presentation on his vision but invited no input from us, it didn't seem appropriate. Instead, as the party developed around us, he and I fronted one another like a couple of male walruses while I imparted my grievances. To deaf ears, it seems.

I recall being summoned by another Taranaki local body to discuss progress on some work I was doing, and my heart lurching as I saw the PR man enter the room with his recording device held prominently. I was to be scolded for the record.

I'm suspicious when a PR person invites me for coffee. It usually means I will be told off like a small child for transgressing in some way or other. Or even worse, asked to write something positive "for a change". Positive is fine...but so is the truth, so far as my research can pin it down.

NPDC didn't seem to be paying attention when I wrote a positive column on how good Pukekura Park was looking last spring. By unfortunate chance, within two days of the column appearing, the main lake was largely drained for work on a new deck. A half million-dollar job, it didn't seem to be mentioned in any council documents I checked beforehand.

Since returning home to Taranaki I've noticed a significant increase in local government PR, some of it impeding media coverage. NPDC has centralised its PR operation into a single formidable entity that composes strategies to gain public approval for whatever major development, planned or otherwise, that may arise.

That's no surprise, but dangerous events like a recent Bell Block sewage spill are sometimes overlooked. And gone are days when I could ring the council and ask them to send me a file...and expect to receive it within minutes.

Another development is Taranaki Regional Council's coding of electronic documents to make them difficult to analyse. Reporting from the TRC's media desk is hindered by the lack of a sound system in the meeting room.

Corporate communications versus journalism has been a bloodless war since the 60s, when chemical company Ivon Watkins-Dow seduced the *Taranaki Daily News*' chief subeditor away to become its "no comment" man.

Now, tricks of the digital world - and the semi-respectability "communications" gained from becoming a degree major in the 90s - have made scrutiny of public goings-on particularly demanding.

Articles in this newspaper last weekend suggest we need to check out a whiff in the recesses of our democratic cave.