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Media Bites: TIME FOR A BUNFIGHT

There's nothing like spending time with someone from a different country to make you appreciate the quirks of language and culture. A recent French visitor made our household see the messy ways of English with new eyes. What is the difference between "bringing" and "taking" someone to a party, she asked. Blowed if we knew.

Some science journalists in the US were equally mystified by a report I wrote recently for the *British Medical Journal* on their row over the relative merits of specialist and generalist science reporters.

The specialists, those who work for publications such as *Science* magazine or *Urology Times*, were scathing about the quality of science and medical reporting in the mainstream media.

The mainstream journalists were equally critical of specialist publications and the trade press, suggesting they may be more likely to have conflicts of interest and to grant advertisers undue influence.

And both groups were puzzled by my description of their stoush as a "bunfight".

"I had an image of disputants throwing small dinner rolls at each other," said one contributor to the National Association of Science Writers discussion list <http://nasw.org/lists/nasw-talk/hyper/index.html>.

"I got an immediate mental image of a foodfight in a school cafeteria where the weapons are bread rolls: an interesting image of a fight that involves hot emotions but does no lasting damage," said another.

The *Toronto Star's* science reporter said the most notorious journalistic bunfight occurred at the annual dinner of the Canadian Parliamentary Press Gallery, "an event of self-deprecating speeches by Pooh-Bahs and skits of dubious taste performed by the journalists".

"At this particular dinner the then Governor General had the

temerity to make a serious speech. The missiles began with sugar cubes but escalated to dinner rolls. And the head table fought back.”

About this point I raced to the Macquarie, thinking for a dreadful moment that I'd been guilty of making up words. Fortunately, bunfight was there: “Colloq, any noisy or disorganised gathering of people, as at a crowded party.”

They mightn't call it that, but American journalists are pretty good at the old bunfight. The other recent stoush on the NASW talk list was over an advertisement by a health care PR agency seeking a freelance journalist to attend the European Association for the Study of Diabetes meeting in Glasgow. All travel and out of pocket expenses would be paid and the journalist “must be able to guarantee 2-4 placements in medical trade publications targeting general practitioners and/or diabetes specialists.”

Subsequent discussion on the list was heated, to say the least, featuring terms like loser, sleazy, unethical and deceptive. One correspondent called journalists who would consider taking such a job “two bit whores” although another felt this comparison unfair because “whores are not inherently in the business of double dealing. They know, and their clients know, what they are selling.”

Not every journalist must have felt that way - apparently there were quite a few replies to the ad. But for most journalists, the notion of such “double-dipping” - being paid to write public relations disguised as journalism - is an anathema.

The stoush highlighted the cultural differences between public relations and journalism - one Canadian PR practitioner was quoted on the list saying that “honesty, accuracy, integrity and truth” are not “what public relations actually is all about -- namely, the advocacy and dissemination of the partisan viewpoints of those who engage our services, for the benefit of those who engage our services”.

The row also highlighted the tensions that can arise for organisations like NASW which represents journalists, public relations practitioners, and those who fall somewhere in the middle of the two camps. The Australasian Medical Writers Associations is similarly divided.

The vibrancy of the debate was also a reminder of cultural differences. If only Australian journalists were a little more inclined towards such fierce and forthright discussion of professional and ethical issues.

It's not as if we don't face the same dilemmas. Journalist Mark Ragg wrote some years ago of being approached by a PR firm working for Kellogg, which offered to pay him to write a newspaper article about a subject they wanted covered. He said no.

I have also turned down a similar approach in recent times, which makes you wonder whether such practices might be more common than they should be. Bring on the bunfight.