

Women's Work IN PUBLIC RELATIONS



Edited by

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SARAH WILLIAMS**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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About the Editors

Elizabeth Bridgen, FHEA, is Principal Lecturer in Public Relations at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. She is co-editor with Sarah Williams of this book, *Women's Work in Public Relations*, to which she also contributed a chapter 'Just Like Any Other': Public Relations Careers in the Adult Industries. She is also co-editor with Dejan Verčič of *Experiencing Public Relations: International Voices* and recently contributed a chapter, 'It's Trivial, Bitchy and Dull' to Martina Topić's edited collection *Towards a New Understanding of Masculine Habitus: Women in Leadership in Public Relations* and is writing a book chapter which explores women's freelance career experiences in the UK public relations industry (with Sarah Bowman and Heather Yaxley) for a forthcoming book on gender and freelancing in the communication industries (edited by Anca Anton and Raluca Moise). She has had work published in *Journal of Media Practice* and *PRism* and recently co-authored a Chartered Institute of Public Relations-funded project on social mobility in public relations (with Stuart Baird) called *Levelling Up the Public Relations Profession*.

Her research explores the lived experience of PR practitioners with a focus on gender and technology and is currently working on a portfolio of research projects on the marginalised in PR communities and is currently researching and writing a book with Ileana Zeler titled *Race and Social Mobility in Public Relations*. This is to be published by Routledge as part of their *Global PR Insights* series.

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About the Contributors

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Sarah Bowman, PhD, MCIPR, SFHEA, is a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria University, UK, and is a former practitioner now turned academic specialising in organisational communication. Sarah's research is rhizomatic and sociological focusing on strategic communications, navigating stakeholder interconnections and exploring transformational and feminine leadership in complex and politicised settings. Her PhD thesis investigated the knowledge, skills and attributes for public affairs practice developing a new knowledge architecture for the field. She has published on knowledge and pedagogy including *Teaching in Higher Education* where her research focuses on exploring metamodern perspectives and the sensibilities necessary to thrive in a dynamic and unstable world. Sarah has authored a range of book chapters including two editions of *The Public Relations Handbook*. She has also published journal articles most recently identifying the knowledge that supports PR practice in *Public Relations Inquiry* and on internal crisis communication and emotion in the *Journal of Communication Management*. With Dr Heather Yaxley, Sarah has developed an ecological radical feminine perspective of women and leadership published in *Towards a New Understanding of Masculine Habitus and Women and Leadership in Public Relations* and co-authored *Public Affairs Management: A Guide to Professional Practice (in print)*.

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Bron Eames has advised numerous national and international brands across B2C and B2B sectors – with particular expertise in food and drink, leisure retail, retail, automotive, transport, construction and home interest. She was managing director of two award winning Midlands' (UK) consultancies for over 20 years and sat on the leadership teams of a number of full-service agencies. A Fellow of the CIPR, past chair of the Midlands committee (twice) and three times chair of PRCA Midlands, she is now an independent consultant, providing non-exec support, mentoring, training and strategic counsel. Here she discusses why she has worked in PR for over 40 years.

Diane Green is PR programme leader at the University of Sunderland, UK. She worked as a journalist for five years before moving into PR in the 1990s, working within the Government Information and Communication Service for the Contributions Agency. She spent the remainder of the decade working in PR consultancies but eventually returned in-house to join the North East's destination marketing agency Newcastle Gateshead Initiative. This led to working on the area's bid to be European Capital of Culture and focused on PR for high profile music and arts events aimed at boosting the region's education, employment, tourism and investment attainment. Diane then joined a global service organisation working with the BBC to raise awareness of the national switchover to digital television. She has won a number of regional CIPR PRide and national Excellence awards and was named North East regional PR practitioner of the year in 2007. She contributed a chapter supporting the enduring role of media relations in PR to the CIPR's 70th anniversary book *Platinum: Celebrating the CIPR and Its Members at 70*. She has taught PR at the University of Sunderland since 2004.

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Dr Heather Yaxley, FCIPR, is an author-academic-educator-consultant-practitioner-historian. Her PhD thesis investigated 'Career Strategies in Public Relations', developing a new tapestry paradigm that provides original insight into contemporary and historical career experiences. Research papers exploring the origins of PR careers as well as career experiences of female practitioners in the 1970s/1980s were presented at the International History of Public Relations Conference and published in *Public Relations Review*. Heather worked in consultancy and in-house roles before setting up her independent business, Applause Consultancy. This supports organisations, teams and individuals with critical thinking, reflexive practice, strategic projects, ethical decision-making,

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Because We Never See It Doesn't Mean It Never Happens

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Abstract

The foreword to *Women's Work in Public Relations* discusses the multitude of ways that women experience public relations (PR) work. Each women's experience depends on, for instance, location, culture, the presence (or otherwise) of a union or professional association, the support of colleagues, the practitioner's domestic circumstances and more. There is not just one female experience of PR.

This foreword reviews the chapters in *Women's Work in Public Relations* and points to the parallels, contradictions, and struggles faced by women working in the little-understood occupation of PR where the everyday work of women is largely invisible. It explains how women working in PR carry out tasks which can at once be necessary, unnecessary, the whim of a client or management, performative, or exploitative – such is the varied and unstructured occupation of PR.

Women face barriers and discrimination at work but past research has not always explained the form that this takes. The foreword notes that much discrimination takes place in plain sight (for instance in terms of erratically applied flexible working policies, unpredictable workloads, or language in professional documents that accepts inequality) and observes that unless we recognise discrimination it's difficult to vocalise opposition to it.

The foreword's discussion of methodology shows that there is no one way to study women working in PR and this book represents a small but rich range of largely qualitative research methodology. It demonstrates that, just as there are many experiences of women in PR, there are also many ways to research them.

Keywords: Public relations; gender; methodology; global public relations; women; sociology of work

‘It would be great if there are photos of you actually at work’, we wrote to one of our authors. ‘We were in PR in the 90s and, while we have posed photos, there are no pictures of us actually working’.

Women who work in PR might have been the subject of TV dramas (such as *Flack* in the United Kingdom and *Workin’ Moms* in Canada) and in the *Bridget Jones’ Diary* series of films (where the eponymous hero ‘fannied around’ with press releases in publishing PR) but we only really saw the caricatures, the hedonism, or the glamour of a metropolitan PR world. The everyday work that we did in PR, as we came into the office, slung our bags under our desks, and our jackets on the back of our chairs, was completely invisible.

What did we do? We spoke to (and were sometimes abused) by journalists. We organised press trips (often handling budgets of 20 times our actual salary). We ran campaigns (some of which changed lives). We wrote copy for on and offline publications (often unaware that our free content was helping make millions for the media owners). We advised clients (sometimes they listened, sometimes they refused to listen, and sometimes they verbally or physically assaulted us). We sometimes travelled the world at someone else’s expense. But who were we? We were an army of invisible women (and men) who helped the media and the public learn and understand everything from useless consumer goods to life-changing health advice.

Horsley wrote in 2009 that ‘public relations histories [...] have ignored women’s contributions [...] [W]omen were very much involved in public relations work at all levels’ (2009, p. 113) and her findings from the United States are echoed around the world. PR itself is a little understood and sometimes invisible occupation with those working in it facing multiple struggles (Keating, 2016) and it is of little surprise that, in a patriarchal society, there is a dearth of writing on women in PR. Isabel Ruiz-Mora, Ileana Zeler and Andrea Oliveira in their write about the double penalty of being a woman in academic PR. It’s a little-known occupation, and as a woman you are marginalised anyway, so are hidden within the university structure under two invisibility cloaks.

There is some excellent writing on women in PR and the struggles they face that is well-known in (PR) academic circles (such as Fitch et al., 2016; Fitch & Third, 2010; Grunig et al., 2013; Toth & Grunig, 1993; Topić et al., 2020, to name just a few) but very little on the day-to-day work that women actually do and the vast majority of this is focused on women in Europe and north America. Much writing (correctly) observes that women face barriers to success in the workplace, or face discrimination, but doesn’t always drill down to explain the form that this discrimination takes across different cultures and workplaces – which can make it more difficult to spot and address. As chapters in this book demonstrate, much discrimination takes place in plain sight (for instance in terms of heavy workloads for diligent and hardworking women, erratically applied flexible working policies,

or language in professional documents that accepts inequality), and unless we can recognise such discrimination it's difficult to vocalise our opposition to it.

Where the everyday lives and work of women are recorded, it's often to highlight the careers of the successful, exceptional or famous (e.g. Miller, 1997; Yaxley, 2013). This isn't to say that this is wrong – there is considerably less of this kind of research anyway than there is writing on elite men – but writing that gives a voice to those who work 'behind the scenes' is less frequent and needs to be qualitative in nature to ensure that the nuances of work and the struggles faced by those often juggling work, family, and personal life and who face inequality based on, for instance, their race, class, disability or sexuality is recorded.

There is no one way to study the lives of women working in PR and this book represents a rich range of largely qualitative research methodology. For instance, Sarah Bowman and Heather Yaxley designed a collaborative historical 'Café Delphi' method to explore women's careers in PR during the 1990s using three themes (sex, sexuality and sexism). It built on feminist critique of the industry and the paradoxical portrayals of women resulting from significant changes over time in media and popular culture. Meanwhile, Susan Kinnear and Tess Lhermitte-Russell deployed a mixed methodology online survey which used both quantitative multiple choice and qualitative, free-text questions to explore the range of maternity provision in the modern communications workplace. In-depth interviews were a common methodology which allowed for a deep exploration but there are other methods which offer an equally rich understanding – for instance, Keren Darmon used discourse analysis and Elizabeth Bridgen combined interviews with case studies. Meanwhile, Sarah Williams used ethnographic methods to observe, question, and record women's experiences of working in PR agencies. Just as there is no single experience of women working in PR, there is also no single way to research them.

There's little that an academic publication like this can do to change the trajectory of research on a certain subject. PR research often focuses on the strategic and corporate and tries to make sense of, justify, or validate the work that PR does. Sometimes, it analyses the language or visuals used in a campaign or looks at audience response. However, researchers sometimes appear to forget that behind the organisational strategy, or the messaging to those affected by a crisis, there is a human being with a multifaceted life trying to do a good job.

When we put out the call for abstracts for this book we didn't really know what to expect. We knew we wanted contributions from around the world and we knew we wanted to hear the stories of women who worked in PR written from both an academic and practitioner perspective. We received largely what we asked for, but with a few unexpected twists. We ended up with two chapters on the experience of women in academia (from Spain and Brazil, respectively). We initially found it curious that we were worried that there might be some degree of repetition between the chapters. Curious because no one sees multiple journal articles on (for instance) modelling crisis communication responses and complains about repetition. We wondered whether we were guilty of unconscious bias, valuing work on women in academia less than work on (say) COVID communications or corporate strategy. Is one type of research more valuable than the

other? No, certainly not – each builds our knowledge of a complex subject. We recognise that we are lacking practitioner stories from certain regions. This is something that troubles us greatly. The absence of Asian, African, Arabic and other voices is a gap in our scholarship which we regret. We used a variety of networks to reach potential authors and asked them to spread our request for abstracts but were aware that these networks were predominantly western-focused. This is a common problem but one we are now aware (in hindsight) needed more effort to overcome. Not only is the theoretical contribution of scholars of PR in the global South under-recorded but the lived experience of women working in promotional culture in developing countries seen even less often in academic texts. We originally accepted practitioner accounts from Malaysia and Nigeria (and Canada and Eastern Europe) but for a variety of reasons they never arrived despite our best efforts to work with and encourage the authors. However, we are happy that we have submissions which, for instance, record the lives of PR practitioners in Turkey, PR academics in Brazil, the experience of older practitioners, and which detail maternity provision across six countries (United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, China and India). We are aware that diversity is not just a matter of country of origin or ethnicity but is intersectional and encompasses areas such as social class, age, ability, and sexuality. We hope that the chapters in this book represent many of these lives.

The perspective taken and stories told about PR academics not only come from different cultures but theoretically represent different approaches to PR scholarship too. In Brazil, PR academics celebrate their students and work collectively to educate the next generation. In Spain there are no female professors of PR and the system seems stacked against them if they wish to win grants or promotion but the Association of Researchers in Public Relations (AIRP)¹ is able to help by mentoring those who wish to achieve leadership in PR academia. Some Spanish academics feel that PR continues to be sidelined within communication faculties. Therefore, seeking support outside the core of the university to which they belong is essential to achieve leadership positions in the field of PR. As one interviewee observed, ‘the AIRP has greatly served all of us because we are alone’. Specifically, it has contributed to the planning of research, the creation of working groups, and helping academic women in PR organise and be strong as a collective – thus demonstrating the power of networking and collective action.

Solidarity, collective action and the joy of working (well) with your colleagues was a popular theme. Elizabeth Bridgen, writing on the lives of PR practitioners in the adult industry, paints a picture of women collaborating and (in common with much literature on outsiders) forming a strong bond with co-workers.

However, many women forged their own paths. Heather Yaxley’s record of interviews with women who began their PR careers in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrates that women who wanted to forge a career had to

¹An association for the promotion of research, teaching, debate, and the publication of all cultural and scientific endeavours related to PR (<http://airrpp.org/>).

make the choice to step away from traditional ‘female’ careers, such as secretarial work, and seek opportunities in PR themselves – sometimes helped by a boss who was supportive of their actions.

The women in Yaxley’s chapter worked alongside other women but their co-workers did not appear to play a part as allies in the stories of these female pioneers. Moving forward 20 years to the 1990s and 2000s, we hear from Diane Green (in one of our practitioner stories) highlighting the ‘Queen Bee’ approach where successful women failed to support other women in the workplace. This is taken further by Begüm Ekmekçigil and Olesia Gorbunava Öner who wrote about successful women in the harsh working environment in Turkey who don’t offer help and support to those around them. Interestingly, the theme of women forging their own path and being helped (rather than hindered) by men was a regular occurrence in our practitioner stories – the opposite of most of the tales told by academics. For instance, Bron Eames detailed the help and support she received from male colleagues in a career spanning 40 years in PR, indeed she claims that, ‘being a lone, senior woman in the early days was, if anything, an advantage’.

We are starting to see a picture which paints something of a juxtaposition: Women can experience a workforce where there is solidarity and collective action by women, for women, or one which is confrontational and oppositional – again by women. However, it would be wrong to see the latter as the main obstacle to women forging careers in PR or remaining (successfully) in the occupation as there are many more problems that women face in the workplace. Keren Darmon in her analysis of the websites of women’s networking occupations demonstrates that women are aware that they have to fight for a seat at the table and highlights the fact that women may have to change their behaviour to progress in their career is normalised and seen as a challenge rather than opposed. Heather Yaxley and Sarah Bowman, meanwhile, list numerous accounts of sexist behaviour and discrimination that women faced in PR in the 1990s – many of which younger readers will still recognise. It is sobering that Susan Kinnear and Tess Lhermitte-Russell revealed in their chapter that, in 2020, 73% of the women they interviewed had experienced sexual discrimination and 66% had been forced to choose between a career in communications and having a child. What is even more startling is that 88% of young female entrants to PR believed having a child would negatively impact their career while 32% had experienced sexual discrimination undertaking their student placement which indicates that the situation for young women entering PR (or the workplace in general) is still unequal and hostile. This inequality can be quite subtle – for instance Jade Bilowol, in her practitioner story, recounted how her male manager dumped increasing amounts of work on her which she absorbed before it became overwhelming.

This theme of burnout was developed in the chapter she wrote with Deborah Wise, Jenny Robinson and Marianne Sison which referred to the constant pressure which PR executives face – for instance, in the need to be ‘always on’ and in the blurring of the boundaries between professional and personal realms, described by one interviewee as follows:

There's such a blur because you are expected to be always on. If you're at the gym and a news story breaks, then you've got to leave the gym and have to deal with that story. That is continuous, that's 365 days a year, that means that you can't actually have a life.

This theme was also identified by Begüm Ekmekçigil and Olesia Gorbunova Öner who unpicked multiple themes relating to the working conditions of Turkish PR practitioners but, in particular, the impact of the long hours culture:

While going through transcripts, it was also observed that many of the women interviewed were either single or had no children and we connected this choice to the lack of time for personal life and taking care of family and children. Those respondents who had a family highlighted the fact that they sometimes do not see their children for a few days in a row even when the children are ill.

Women often feel as though they need to put on a performance or present an acceptable version of themselves to colleagues, clients, and other stakeholders. This theme is explored in Sarah Williams' chapter examining the layers and forms which this performance can take. The women in her study all 'perform', to a greater or lesser extent, roles set out for them in the culture of both the agency environment and the wider occupation. Diane Green identifies elements of performance in her practitioner account, noting that many women recalled working alongside problematic 'female leaders who very much demonstrated traditional male traits'.

However, despite the issues faced by practitioners, PR can be an exciting job which changes lives. Sheena Thomson worked as a Media Briefing Officer for NATO during the Bosnian War and was told at her leaving party: 'Sheena, you saved lives, there is no doubt about that'. Sheena left a legacy – which is exactly what Fabiana Gondim Mariutti encourages women in PR to do in her letter to remind women in PR to have their voice in time and space.

Conclusion

What this introduction and its very brief account of the book's content demonstrates is that while women working in PR across the world face many of the same problems and issues (and draw comfort and solidarity from colleagues), their experiences are all individual. As Aimee Postle observes when writing about flexible working the provision is not the same and can and will be adapted differently depending on a multitude of circumstances which includes the leaders' own experiences.

As we have hopefully shown in this introduction – and in this book – women experience PR roles in a multitude of ways which can vary according to not just location or culture (which would be obvious) but myriad other factors – their sector, the presence (or otherwise) of a union or professional association, the

support of the colleagues, the life story of their managers, the practitioner's domestic circumstances, and more. These factors are so individual that there cannot just be one female experience of PR or one lived experience which means that any research can only record part of the female experience of PR.

This book is one part of it.

We hope you enjoy reading it.

Elizabeth and Sarah

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