Public relations and ‘its’ media: Exploring the role of trade media in the enactment of public relations’ professional project

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Abstract
This article explores the relationship between trade media and the construction of occupational legitimacy in the context of professional projects, using the example of public relations. We suggest that the practices of trade journalism result in such media playing the role of an institutional sub-system within occupational fields such as public relations, helping to construct occupational archetypes that have disciplinary effects on practitioners and provide the basis for public claims to legitimacy. We illustrate our argument by presenting the results of a critical discourse analysis of PRWeek, the main trade publication for public relations in the UK, to demonstrate how jurisdiction, practice and practitioners are constructed through media discourses in ways that serve the professional project articulated by the powerful actors in the field.

Keywords
Business and trade media, legitimacy, occupational archetype, professional project, public relations (PR), specialist journalism

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Introduction

The importance of media practice as a factor in the social construction of reality has been established by many previous studies (Hall et al., 1978; Schudson, 1995; Tuchman, 1978). These effects have been revealed in relation to choices made about the events and news stories covered in ‘hard’ news bulletins by mainstream journalists. However, ‘hard news’ reporting is not the only location where the impact of journalism on the construction of reality can be explored. Other forms of journalism, such as specialist reporting, may construct particular versions of reality in the contexts in which they are relevant.

One such context is that of an occupational field such as law, medicine, accounting or public relations. Here, the role played by trade media is of particular interest because of its links with practitioner communities. Little research exists on trade media reporting and so the ideological impact of the representations generated through this media practice, both within occupational fields and in wider society, is poorly understood. However, a useful heuristic for such analyses is the professional project, or the mechanism through which occupational fields ‘translate a scarce set of cultural and technical resources into a secure and institutionalized system of occupational and financial rewards so as to pave the way for collective mobility and social advancement’ (Bolton and Muzio, 2008: 284). Professional projects are a process by which meaning is attached to different aspects of an occupation and its practices in order to establish value and legitimacy for that occupation in wider society (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Larson, 1977: xvii). In other words, the professional project is a bridge between the internal logic of the field and the means by which that logic becomes meaningful to a wider audience.

Public acceptance of claims to occupational legitimacy is fundamental to a successful professional project – and ‘public image making’ through media representations is ‘crucial’ to this process (Abbott, 1988: 60–61). Specialist trade media represent one discursive space where such media representations are made, primarily to an audience of practitioners. As we argue below, in the process they play a significant role in the creation of an archetypal occupational and practitioner identity and purpose within the occupational field. This, in turn, provides a foundation for the jurisdictional claims inherent to the professional project that allow occupations to claim societal value and legitimacy.

These processes are of particular interest for PR, which faces an ongoing struggle for legitimacy in the face of continuous attacks on the ethics, morality and social legitimacy of its practices and practitioners (Dinan and Miller, 2007; Ewen, 1996; Jackall and Hirota, 2000; Mickey, 2002; Miller and Dinan, 2008). In this article, therefore, we focus on the role played by trade media in relation to the occupational field of PR and its professional project. We argue that trade media coverage of occupational events, practitioners and practices, which circulates extensively among members of occupational fields, also contributes to the construction of those fields, through the representation of particular occupational jurisdictions, identities, practices and habitus. We ask the following specific research questions: (1) How does an archetypal occupational identity and purpose for PR emerge through trade media coverage? (2) What purpose do these serve in the context of PR’s professional project?
Our discussion starts with an overview of the concept of the professional project as an exercise in legitimation. We recognize that our study is situated at the intersection of two different occupational practices: journalism and public relations, as well as two different fields – the media, or more specifically magazine publishing, and what is often referred to somewhat loosely as the public relations (PR) industry. Therefore, the discussion continues with a reflection on media representations of PR and the particular practices of trade media, to provide an appropriate context for the study. We then present the findings of an exploratory analysis of PRWeek, the dominant trade magazine for PR in the UK, organized to respond to our theoretical interests. We conclude our discussion with broader reflections on the ways in which specialist media (in this case, specialist magazine publishing) can contribute to the construction of particular versions of occupational fields and thereby help or hinder professional projects and the search for social legitimacy by occupational groups.

The professional project and the construction of legitimacy

The professional project is both an internal process enacted within occupational fields, based on the objective and subjective formulation of professional work, and an inherently social process of claiming jurisdiction for what Abbott terms ‘the central organizing reality of professional life’ (1988: 84): the control of tasks. Both processes combine to produce a dynamic in occupational fields that is ultimately oriented towards establishing externally sanctioned legitimacy in order to justify social advancement through the fact of being a professional in a particular field (Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977; Pieczka and L’Etang, 2006).

External legitimacy is derived from the recognition conferred on an occupation by other social institutions, including government, legislature, academia, the media, client and competing organizations. Abbott explains this process in terms of different ‘arenas’ in which jurisdictional claims are made: the arena of the legal system (currently, not relevant to PR, which in the UK, as in almost any other country in the world, is not regulated by law); the arena of the workplace; and the arena of public opinion (1988: 59–62). The representation of an occupation in the media is one means by which jurisdictional claims may be made in the arena of public opinion. However, in the case of trade media, where readership is limited to members of the occupational field, such representations may be understood additionally as claims that operate in the arena of the workplace, broadly conceptualized. In both arenas, these representations may be generated either independently by the journalist, or in response to promotional work by organizations and individuals, designed to enhance occupational authority over a set of tasks and, in effect, an area of social life.

Jurisdictions, however, can never be regarded as permanently settled because the social and professional contexts of occupational fields are inherently fluid: all occupations engaged in a professional project must establish their legitimacy on an ongoing basis (Abbott, 1988: 39). Advances in knowledge and technological change, for example, may result in competition over territory and redefinition of tasks that constitutes a challenge to established jurisdictions, while changing social and political norms may
produce shifts in occupational roles and responsibilities that require equal vigilance on
the part of the occupation (Freidson, 2001). These ongoing challenges must be managed
both within the field, to ensure a coherent occupational identity and practice, and beyond
it, to repel the threat of encroachment and fragmentation.

The field of PR, for example, is regularly accused of manipulating public opinion in
the interests of powerful corporate and government interests and jurisdictional chal-
 lenges come from marketing, internal communications, web communications specialists,
events managers, and other communications-related occupations (Davies, 2008; Hutton,
2001; Roper, 2005; Toledano, 2010). These threats have been countered in the arena of
public opinion by the main professional body for PR practitioners in the UK, the
Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR). It has adopted a two-pronged strategy,
where legitimacy is established by appealing to the notion of the public interest, on the
one hand, and to the mastery of technical skills derived from a ‘scientific’ body of knowl-
dge, on the other (Pieczka, 2007). By justifying the value offered to wider society, and
by providing ‘objective’ evidence for the jurisdictional claims made for the field, the
CIPR appeals for legitimacy based both on a generalizable benefit (e.g. PR works in the
public interest, has a positive economic impact and provides employment) and on spe-
cific benefits (e.g practitioners are trustworthy partners who deliver precisely defined
benefits to clients in ways that are predictable and measurable).

The success of external appeals for legitimacy – germane to the professional project
as a means of securing jurisdiction over a set of tasks – is in part dependent on the inter-
 nal management of the occupational field. Claiming jurisdiction requires generalizations
about an occupation, because ‘[p]ublic jurisdiction concerns an abstract space of work,
in which there exist clear boundaries between homogeneous groups. Differences of pub-
clic jurisdiction are differences between archetypes’ (Abbott, 1988: 60). Consequently,
the existence of a normative professional field, defined in terms of archetypal organiza-
tions, individuals and practices, is a prerequisite for external legitimation. Discursive and
material aspects of these archetypes are also produced by this legitimacy, because in
order to retain the symbolic power that legitimacy confers over a certain territory, the
normative field must be evidenced on an ongoing basis.

The construction of an archetypal field involves the standardization of tasks, roles,
occupational identity and occupational purpose. Those involved in this process will be
the occupational elite, who have the power to name what does and does not constitute
belonging in the field. They will include professional associations, who have the sym-
bolic authority to speak ‘on behalf of’ the occupation (Bourdieu, 1991), as well as organ-
izations or individuals generally regarded as successful in the context of the field. For
example, professional associations specify standards of practice in formal documents,
training courses, processes of certification and validation, while elite organizations and
individuals in the occupational field articulate their version of occupational reality
through their own websites and brochures, and thereby set benchmarks for their peers
(Abbott, 1988; Annisette, 2003; Edwards, 2011; Lee, 1999; Pieczka, 2002). While these
standards may be differently enacted in organizational contexts, nonetheless they help to
construct an archetypal form of professionalism within an occupational field that has real
disciplinary effects, prompting normative attitudes, values and practices among practi-
tioners (Battani, 1999; Grey, 1998; Hodgson, 2002).
Our exploratory study is focused on the ways in which a PR occupational archetype is constructed in the trade media as part of the process of making jurisdictional claims for PR in the public and workplace arenas. We explore the representation of occupational values, norms and practices, notions of success, and the allocation of status. In the next section, we set the context for the empirical analysis with a brief review of existing research on the representation of PR in the media.

Public relations in the media

Previous studies of media representations of PR have focused heavily on non-specialist print media, often utilizing quantitative content analysis to describe both how the practitioners’ work is understood in terms of its content and how the practice is valued in terms of media censure or support (Hutton, 1999; Lee, 2001; Sampsup, 2003; Spicer, 1993). The first of these preoccupations reflects the PR jurisdiction, i.e. tasks performed by practitioners, using categories such as persuasion, advocacy, public information, cause-related PR, image–reputation PR, and relationship management (Hutton 1999; Sampsup, 2003). Studies of media perceptions of PR (positive, negative, neutral) deal with the public legitimacy of the practice (Henderson, 1998; Sampsup, 2003). Overall, this research paints a fairly consistent picture of PR as a somewhat shady practice of manipulation and lies at worst, image and reputation management at best (Sampsup, 2003; Spicer, 1993). There have been few studies of the media representation of PR in the UK specifically (Echo Research Limited, 2002); nevertheless, what has been done confirms broadly similar issues and trends in the British print media. For example, Echo Research conducted two studies of UK national newspapers, in 1999 and 2001, and found a predominantly negative image of PR dominating the coverage.

The picture presented by this admittedly limited body of work shows the representation of PR in general media is built on debates about the ethics of its influence in the public sphere, unless its contribution to commercial success is the primary focus (Echo Research Limited, 2002: 4). What remains unexamined are representations of PR in its own trade press. This is particularly important because of the close links between such media and the occupational field, which comprises both a source of news and expertise for specialist journalists and a tightly targeted audience for that news. While no research has been conducted specifically on PR trade media, some insights into the relationship between such media and the occupational field can be gleaned from research on trade media and specialist reporting.

Trade media and specialist reporting

Much of the trade press is published as magazines, a poorly understood area of journalism and media practice. Magazine research constitutes a very small proportion of media research in general (Johnson, 2007: 525) and that which exists tends to focus on a small number of consumer or news magazines (e.g. Cosmopolitan, Newsweek). Studies of business magazines, and even more so of specialist or trade magazines, are virtually nonexistent (for an exception, see Ekinsmyth, 2002). However, one starting point for analysis is Van der Wurff’s (2005) conceptualization of the business magazine as
focused on the provision of ‘job- or task-related information to decision makers and professionals (Van den Brink, 1987) [and] sold on national markets, with circulations that lie in between those of scientific journals and consumer magazines’ (Van der Wurff, 2005: 144).

Business publishing, however, is not limited to magazines. According to Business Information Forum (Dear, 2001) companies active in the industry sell four main types of product: publishing products such as magazines, newsletters, and reports; events, e.g. conferences, trade shows; list-based products such as directories; and electronic online services, e.g. internet sites. Important recent trends include the growth of ‘brand extensions’ such as seminars and awards, which account for around 30 percent of revenue, and the increasing importance of digital, as opposed to print media (Professional Publishers Association, 2010). For example, Haymarket, the publishing house that owns the main trade publication for PR, PRWeek, has a stable of communication trade magazines, such as Marketing, Campaign and Media Week, which form the basis of an online business website and portal delivery service BrandRepublic.com. Blogs and daily web updates are emailed to registered readers and a range of additional products are promoted to subscribers. These include: practitioner directories, conferences, seminars and annual awards (the PRWeek Awards have been running since 1987).

The business media’s connection to its audience can also be analysed through the specific news gathering and production characteristics of specialist reporting. Research on specialist reporting has identified the particular dynamics produced by the conflation of source and audience, where readers and their professional lives also comprise the main news sources for reporters. This is frequently accompanied by an over-dependence on a limited number of sources for both ‘facts’ and the interpretation of those ‘facts’ (Farago and Peter, 1976; Rowe, 2004; Schudson, 1995). Journalists’ dependence on professionals for content, for example, requires long-term investment in relationships with key spokespeople and organizations in a situation where there may be relatively few authoritative potential sources available. In turn, this means that challenging these same individuals or organizations is risky and can lead to reporters being ostracized, making their job more difficult (Farago and Peter, 1976; Rowe, 2004). Finally, the conflation of source and audience in some specialist reporting also leads to the coverage being assessed for its accuracy and quality by those featured in it. Thus, not only are journalists dependent on professionals for content, they are also dependent on them for affirmation of the quality of their coverage. Because these kinds of fields are relatively specialized, accuracy is difficult for those outside the field to judge and this dependence becomes almost inevitable (Schudson, 1995).

Overall, research suggests that business media may be expected to have a significant impact on their readership as a result of their extensive reach and their focus on practice, industry performance, and debates in the occupational field. In this sense, they may be regarded as an ‘institutional subsystem’ of the field (Hirsch, 1972), promoting normative forms of occupational practice and identity that, because of their affirmation through the institutional role of the media outlet (Benson, 2006), attract symbolic value within the occupational field. This widely circulated version of what is valued in the field, like other occupational discourses, is likely to have disciplinary effects on the practitioners who
engage with it. Consequently, what appears in the trade media is likely to be an important factor influencing the construction of archetypes in the occupational field.

**Methodology**

Our approach to the empirical analysis was framed by the two research questions noted above. We used critical discourse analysis to deconstruct the coverage of the PR industry in ‘typical texts’ (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 29) of PR’s trade media in order to establish what kinds of occupational archetypes were being communicated and what purpose these archetypes might serve. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) recognizes that discourse constitutes and is constitutive of social reality (Fairclough, 1995: 55; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997), and that the media, as a powerful social institution, are a site of discursive struggles and social change processes (Fairclough, 1995). As such, it is particularly appropriate for the focus of this study.

Our analysis is guided by Van Leeuwen’s framework (2008), particularly at the level of textual analysis, but we draw on other strands of CDA (see Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 20) in our interpretation of the findings. In line with Van Leeuwen’s focus on ‘the primacy of practice’ in representation (2008: 4), we understand discourse as a recontextualization of social practice. Van Leeuwen’s framework identifies how non-linguistic (what PR practitioners do) and linguistic practices (how PR practice is talked about) are entwined in texts. Taken at its simplest level, this kind of CDA requires specific attention to how actors, actions, performance modes, presentation styles, locations, time and resources are present in the text. However, recontextualizing social practices also involves the inclusion of ‘contextually specific legitimations of these social practices, answers to the spoken or unspoken questions ‘Why should we do this’?’ (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 105). Applying this approach to our analysis of how the PR occupation is recontextualized in PRWeek texts demands that we identify: who is involved and what actions they perform; their mode of performance, to be understood as ‘stage directions’ (Van Leeuwen 2008: 10); how the actors present themselves; and, finally, ways of legitimizing, constructing reasons for those addressed by the discourse to view the practices it presents as sensible and acceptable.

A further level of complexity is added by the fact that what the texts offer is passed ‘through the filter of the practices in which [the recontextualized practices] are inserted’ (van Leeuwen, 2008: 12). In this case, PR practices are filtered through the practices of business media publishing outlined above. We were mindful of this context in our analysis of the data, which we understand to be located at the intersection of these two forms of practice and therefore shaped by both, rather than simply reflecting one or the other.

**Data and approach to analysis**

We chose to focus on one publication for our text selection: the UK version of PRWeek. This is the most firmly established trade magazine for the PR industry with a sizeable subscriber base. It was launched in 1984 as a private venture and sold to the larger publishing house, Haymarket, in 1988 (PRWeek, 1999). According to the Audit
Circulations, for the period covering 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2011, the magazine’s circulation was 12,501, of which 63.6 percent, or 8500, was multiple copies subscription, relating to the CIPR’s use of PRWeek as a member benefit. PRWeek does not have a direct competitor in the UK, remaining the only weekly magazine for PR practitioners, although there are monthly and online publications targeted at practitioners (e.g. CorpComms, Communicate, PR Moment). Its reach and the wide range of brand extensions consumed by readers (conferences, seminars, annual awards) make it visible and accessible to practitioners throughout the ‘arena of the workplace’ (Abbott, 1988), a powerful tool through which an occupational archetype may be communicated.

In our selection of texts we defined ‘typicality’ by sampling at the level of magazine issues, rather than individual articles. The samples were originally selected for two smaller studies and combined for the purposes of this analysis. The final data set comprised 10 issues of PRWeek randomly selected from each month of 2009 (with the exception of April and August), and 12 consecutive issues published from 24 September to 10 December 2010. The 2010 sample provided the data for the analysis of publication structure and discourse analysis of content other than practitioner profiles, while the 2009 sample was used specifically for in-depth analysis of practitioner profiles (see below for a discussion of the publication structure).

We followed Van Leeuwen’s (2008) three-stage process of analysis. First, we analysed the structure of PRWeek, because, within the broad practice of ‘business media publishing’, the distinct journalistic genres, or ‘semiotic ways of acting and interacting’ (Fairclough, 2009: 164) that appeared in PRWeek represented an important filter that influenced the presentation of the occupation. The categories of subject matter that merited inclusion were, in themselves, a statement of priority and status within the field. These included: news stories, features, profiles, editorials, comment pieces and gossip columns. With this context in mind, we then deconstructed the discourses across the data set, to establish how archetypal identities and practices emerged. Finally, we reflected on these archetypes in terms of their effect on the professional project.

Recontextualizing the PR field

As argued above, the media practices of PRWeek require a particular formula to meet the definition of a ‘trade magazine’. This is reflected in the structure of the publication, the topics covered and the discourses used to narrate the news stories. These recontextualize the field of PR, constructing archetypal jurisdictions and practices by lending symbolic status to the sectors, topics and narratives worthy of coverage.

Structure of PRWeek and the archetypal PR field

PRWeek has between 32 and 36 pages each week, depending on the volume of advertising. Each issue contains an average of 66 stories, including briefs and features, but excluding advertising. Every issue is structured in the same way (Table 1).

The largest proportion of space is devoted to news, split into four pages of general industry news and six pages of sector-specific reporting. In the news sections, two to three full stories are complemented by four to five briefs. Sector-specific pages prioritize
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Table 1. Publication structure: Page and story counts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Pages allocated</th>
<th>Full articles</th>
<th>Briefs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Affairs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 or 3</td>
<td>3 or 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 or 3</td>
<td>3 or 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City &amp; Corporate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 or 3</td>
<td>4 or 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 or 3</td>
<td>4 or 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Sector</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 or 3</td>
<td>4 or 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prweek.com/uk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaigns</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feature*</td>
<td>3 or 4</td>
<td>1 or 2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation survey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awards**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flack</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*No features appeared in the 5 November issue.

**Awards features only appeared when awards events were held, or when nominations were being sought for forthcoming awards.

particular PR specialisms as sites where PR practitioners ‘perform’ their work; this selection of specialisms simultaneously defines which of the many possible sites for PR work matter most. Other sections of the publication deal with various forms of practice. Campaign and award pages present best practice; the media page consists of advice about how to approach a featured publication with a story; the ‘profile’ is a double-page spread about a successful practitioner and their career trajectory; and features generally take the form of ‘how to’ articles about specific areas of practice (e.g. social media, new communications trends, career management). One double-page spread is devoted specifically to opinion, including one editorial, two other columns featuring four different columnists on a rotating basis, and four reader letters. Opinion is also featured in box-outs on other pages, as comment from practitioner ‘experts’ on the main articles.

An analysis of the articles appearing in each genre revealed a range of themes warranting space in the publication. Articles were categorized in two or more themes, where the content justified this (Table 2).

The primary focus of the news sections was to communicate industry events; the vast majority of these were about major account wins or new tenders and included the name of the client, the type of brief, the financial size of the account or campaign, and in the case of an account win, the name of the winning consultancy and the names or number of those who lost out. Less frequently, news stories featured the movement of individuals within the field, and even less common were stories about organizational or sectoral changes. Where these did appear, they related to consultancy or public sector contexts.
Outside news, the next major category of story was campaign outlines, a showcase for best practice as well as occasionally for the analysis of failed campaigns.

The construction of occupational and individual archetypes in formal news and profile features is complemented by the ‘gossip’ genre of reporting that characterizes the back page of the publication (titled ‘Flack’). Reports on this page cover informal events and insider gossip. Quirky photos accompany ‘briefs’ that are not campaign-led, but deal more with the personalities, unusual events and humorous aspects of PR life. The tone is chatty, informal and almost intimate between the journalist and reader – the latter being invited to become a privileged ‘insider’ by sharing gossip about their peers. This type of coverage reveals the ‘human’ side of the profession (for example, ‘Flack’ frequently features good deeds such as charity initiatives, or amusing anecdotes of times when an individual’s professional façade cracked) and caters in particular to the discourse of fun and creativity as part of the professional personality.

Taken together, the publication structure and the genres it contains help to define the normative priorities in the archetypal occupational field, where status is based on financial worth, seniority, client list and sector specialism. The criteria that define success or significance in the field are already established among practitioner-readers and therefore need not be questioned; their reproduction as criteria for newsworthy stories reinforces their normative status. Moreover, financial and sector-related information about practitioners, organizations and clients simultaneously situate them within the field. They are

### Table 2. Story themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Account wins/new pitches</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign outlines (best practice) – covers full page to small briefs</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointments/moves (consultancy)</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointments/moves (in-house)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes/evolutions in consultancy sector</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-reporting (e.g. Blog excerpts/most read online)</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client changes/restructures (public sector)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Expert’ assessment of practice</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awards/industry achievements</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion on practice (not PRWeek)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media environment</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comms spending (including revelations re practice and its cost)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client changes/restructures (third sector)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profiles</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRWeek opinion</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation survey</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client changes/restructures (private sector)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘How-to’ articles</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and best practice tools</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
featured because they are the archetypal actors and arenas that matter for PR. Similarly, ‘best practice’ stories routinely affirm standard components of practice including the brief; campaign objectives; choice of method; and evaluation, usually focused on media coverage but occasionally including some other form of audience engagement such as attendance at events. Their consistent and repeated presentation in each issue means they become the archetypal actions that define PR practice and practitioners. In this way, the publication structure becomes synonymous with the archetypal field, on the basis of which arguments about PR’s jurisdiction and legitimacy are played out.

**Constructing occupational identity and practice**

Following our analysis of the structure of *PRWeek*, we focused on a more detailed critical discourse analysis of individual articles to establish the specific aspects of occupational identity and practice (in Van Leeuwen’s terms, who is involved and the actions they perform) normalized through the coverage.

**Occupational identity.** In the texts, occupational identity is an abstract articulation of the role for PR that creates a space in which practitioners work. It defines the boundaries of who can be involved and articulates the most desirable actions associated with the role. PR is most frequently presented as a strategic function that supports organizations in commercial and/or reputational difficulty, thereby ensuring those organizations can reassert control over their environment, as the following excerpts illustrate (emphases added):

- Kraft foods has turned to Blue Rubicon for corporate reputation advice, as the dust settles on its controversial £11.5bn takeover of Cadbury. (240910/2/kraftcalls)

- Brunswick is leading comms around the restructure of troubled Gartmore after the crisis-hit fund manager ditched incumbent M:Communications. (101210/9/brunswickcalled)

- Crisp brand Golden Wonder has hired Shine Communications as it attempts to reinstate itself as a household favourite in the snacks market. (101210/2/shinewins)

More specifically, these announcements implicitly position PR as a function that has expertise in resolving complex commercial and communications issues. This strategic expertise is given additional import through association with significant clients, described in terms of their size, global reach and/or financial significance. Thus, readers hear about accounts for ‘Drinks giant Diageo’ (101210/4/whiskydrive); ‘Danish beer giant Carlsberg’ (261110/1/carlsbergrestructures); ‘US’ market-leading toothpaste, Arm & Hammer …’ (101210/4/lexisscoops); ‘Two major charities …’ (101210/8/charitiesplan); and ‘The [Singapore Tourist Agency] PR brief is the second largest currently up for grabs within the City.’ (261110/4/imagerefresh). The ability to assist such complex organizations in their commercial objectives implicitly positions PR as an authority in business matters as well as communications, able to lead rather than being dependent on other occupations for direction.
**Occupational jurisdiction.** The construction of PR as a field concerned exclusively with strategic communications issues in organizational contexts is underlined by the almost total lack of stories about the social or cultural context for PR work – a logical consequence of the trade media practice that defines *PRWeek*. Indeed, only two stories appeared that alluded to wide social issues: one short news story on the need for greater diversity and the launch of a new charity to encourage graduates from ethnic minority communities to pursue a career in PR (261110/4/charityfor); and one on work–life balance, although the latter was a secondary theme in a wider story about unemployed PR practitioners looking for in-house jobs rather than consultancy work. In this article, the MD of a specialist recruitment agency was cited as saying ‘candidates had recently expressed opinions that in-house positions offered individuals more ability to control their hours and workload, given the over-servicing that has become prevalent in the agency world’ (261110/2/PROskeen). While the statement suggested a distortion of work–life balance, the point was not pursued in any depth. In this way, the exclusive focus on internal matters and, in particular, the implicit primacy of client interests, combines with the structure of the publication to produce an archetypal field that is autonomous and superior to external groups or individuals who might presume to judge its effectiveness.

This archetype is echoed in coverage responding to jurisdictional threats towards PR and its status. For example, the relationship between marketing and PR was explicitly addressed in an article about Renault-Nissan merging their marketing and communications departments into one division (240910/4/Renault-nissan). Comments on the story by practitioner experts reflected the long-standing territorial struggle between PR and marketing. They considered whether PR budgets may be ‘subsumed’ by marketing, or characterized it as ‘just a phase’, a suggestion that also implied the true value of PR as a standalone function would be realized once again, after the organization emerged from this ‘phase’. Renault-Nissan’s vice-president for the newly established global marketing communications team received a right to reply, but this did not appear in the main article; instead his comments were placed in a smaller, separate section at the bottom of the page, physically and narratively relegating his opinion as compared to that of the PR experts quoted in the main article.

A similar normalization of PR’s autonomy and strategic value can be seen in stories about cuts in PR budgets. At the time of the 2010 data collection, public sector cuts to communications functions were being discussed by government; at the same time, the industry faced the prospect of a declining private sector spend on PR. Consequently, financial losses and reductions in influence as a result of restructuring were two significant storylines within the ‘sectoral changes’ theme during this period. In most cases, cuts were characterized as negative rather than justified; the communications function was the victim, rather than an area where spending had been excessive. Thus, the ‘pressure on government comms has never been greater’ as a result of ‘harsh limits on departmental spending powers from 2011/12 to 2014/15’ (240910/1/whitehallexplores). Restructuring initiatives that might combine PR with other disciplines were also rejected as violating common sense: ‘it seems like a lot of bureaucracy. You could end up spending more time arguing over who is in charge than getting the job done’ (240910/1/whitehallexplores).
Occupational expertise. The construction of PR as an autonomous and strategic function is only possible if practitioner expertise aligns with the demands of such a role. In PRWeek, expertise was presented through the almost exclusive use of PR practitioners as the judges of their peers’ practice, status and success in the field. Third parties, offering perspectives from outside the occupational field, were rarely given a voice and their perspectives were marginalized as a consequence. Expert commentary was embedded in stories about the dilemmas faced by clients or, to a lesser extent, by the PR industry itself. For example, stories about the need to maintain PR’s relevance to its client organizations included practitioners commenting on the need to demonstrate a good return on the investment made in PR (240910/11/rumpuswins), or to be more strategic in order to demonstrate greater value to the organization (261110/6/pragenciesadvised). Expertise was also constructed through practitioners passing verdict on campaigns initiated by other agencies, where the objective nature of the assessment was signalled by the use of highlighted boxes to divide commentary from the rest of the article, and by a picture of the expert practitioner in question. Most of the practitioners featured in this way were male senior managers in large PR agencies; the status implied by their authority to comment suggested they were successful – and therefore represented a type of ‘ideal’ practitioner that others may aspire to. At the same time, the authority to comment was legitimized by their senior position and the organization they worked for, both of which were invariably given alongside their name and acted as evidence of knowledge and experience.

Performance and presentation: Archetypal practitioners. Expert commentaries aside, the most powerful practitioner archetypes were presented in the practitioner profile features. Here, ‘stage directions’ for the appropriate performance of the PR practitioner and presentation rules were communicated through narratives that emphasized forms of embodiment (self-presentation), cultural capital, and personality including approach to work. These were legitimized by linking them to a summary of the practitioner’s professional achievements, including unique aspects of their career, professional networks and particular skills (representing their routine action).

‘Stage directions’ for performing the role of PR practitioner appropriately took a variety of forms. Certain personality traits – modesty, competence rooted in a natural instinct for communication, and sociability – appeared repeatedly in the different practitioner profiles. Understating social and professional success was a recurrent theme. Practitioners were modest about their achievements and themselves, despite the extraordinary aspects of their lives and careers:

Ferrabee’s modesty shines through in the interview. He claims to have ‘no recognisable skills except experience. (060209/18/redundancyspecialist)

Raoul Shah partied with superstar Beyoncé and her husband, rap’s first CEO Jay-Z, at this year’s Cannes film festival, but you would never guess it, thanks to his super-cool demeanour. When talking about celebrities, he might as well be detailing what brand of breakfast cereal he prefers. (061109/16/naturalnetworker)
Not infrequently, practitioner success was implicitly grounded in unusual beginnings to their lives or careers. Normally hidden in the daily routine of PR practice, these forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) were given particular prominence in the archetypal performance narrated through the profiles, where they served as an implicit touchstone for the practitioners’ apparently unique approach to PR.

Warley’s … interest in world affairs began earlier, a product of having South African parents who lived under apartheid, but who came to the UK so that their children did not grow up under that system. (041209/16/savetheworld)

When growing up he went to nine schools, in six cities, in three continents, and he jokes: ‘I studied the French revolution three times in two different languages and I still do not know a thing about it.’ (060209/18/redundancyspecialist)

The prominence of cultural capital communicated that ideal practitioners always had the potential to draw on unusual personal resources in order to excel in their performance. The emphasis on the performance of personal qualities rather than skills continued with comments from notable colleagues on the practitioners’ aptitude for PR, and on what makes them stand out from their peers. This blending together of references to what ideal practitioners do and how they perform transforms learned skills into natural and essential features, a ‘flair’, or a ‘rare’ quality of the archetypal practitioner:

Bell Pottinger group chairman Kevin Murray points to Jarvis’ flair for strategic thinking: ‘Coming out of TV, she is a fast thinker. She is tough but a good listener.’ (230909/16/defendinghealth)

Globe-Trotter director Gary Bott says: ‘Raoul is quite simply one of those rare individuals who understands and respects each and every brand with which he works.’ (061109/16/naturalnetworker)

Sociability, often presented as social capital (Bourdieu, 1997), or professional and personal connections with brands and individuals, is linked to career success, often in the same sentence. Thus, in the example below a senior politician is Allan’s ‘closest friend’ while a senior editor is ‘a regular golfing chum’.

Allan remains close to his former Downing Street colleagues, many of whom are now in the cabinet. In particular, work and pensions secretary James Purnell was best man at his wedding and remains his closest friend. … Many senior journalists also know him well. The Sun’s George Pascoe-Watson, a regular golfing chum, says: ‘He used to firefight in Downing Street and knows the players – he totally understands the system.’ (150509/16/leavingblair)

Indeed, sociability is a required aspect of performance. Here, one practitioner’s intensity is excused by an ‘insider’ who reveals his ‘secret’ identity when not working. In this sense, sociability is presented as evidence of a ‘balanced’ individual; workaholic practitioners are excluded.
Whitehorn does not possess the bubbly persona of his boss. On the contrary, he seems rather intense. … But an industry insider says ‘while there are traces of geekiness about him’ he is actually ‘a late-night party animal who likes fine wine and shooting.’ (190609/14/galacticenterprise)

In fact, the distinctiveness of the ideal practitioner is often constructed by combining contradictory elements that reflect these two dimensions of the practitioner’s performance: playfulness and cool professionalism.

He played poker with Boyzone and got the Playboy Bunnies to stop traffic in Piccadilly at the same time as writing documents about deregulating the gambling industry. … When he was setting up the world’s largest poker game ‘it went from the sublime to the ridiculous. I would get a call in the pub and I would be saying things like ‘yeah, Slims, I’m not sure if the Devil Fish and the Hendon Mob agree with that, but I’ll see what I can do.’ (200309/14/easyhospitality)

Workaholism notwithstanding, dedication to the client and/or cause was a universal and explicit performance requirement, evidence of the practitioners’ focus, determination and drive to succeed on the client’s behalf.

… there is no doubting Cameron’s focus. There is the zeal of the new convert about her as she discusses Samsung’s rapid growth and diverse range of products. (240709/18/impatience)

He is a loyal, bright and tenacious individual who will continue to pursue things when others give up. He … understands the slightly servile remit and that is one of his biggest strengths. (200309/14/easyhospitality)

Alongside these various directions for the archetypal practitioner performance, the profiles included explicit comment on practitioners’ appearance and self-presentation, focusing in particular on embodiment and linking this to competence. Gender played a significant role in how this was articulated, with different emphases for male and female practitioners. Women’s physical attractiveness and dress was often featured in the introduction to the article. At times, these descriptions implied the presence of intriguing aspects of (carefully controlled) personality, a device to generate interest in the practitioner and her story. Thus, in the first extract below, the reader wonders how Lennard has been successful despite her incongruity, while in the second, the possibility that Jarvis owns a pair of leather trousers counters the potentially staid, over-professional ‘pearls and smart blouse’.

Breakfast is served at the Wolseley and Mandi Lennard looks out of place amid the restaurant’s understated, business-suited clientele. Her long, bright blue nails are embossed with the Nike logo and she wears a jacket printed with a screaming face and accessorised with huge designer necklaces. Lennard looks too young and edgy to be a traditional fashion PR professional. (180909/16/Londonloves)

Sian Jarvis … is glamorous but perfectly presented in pearls and a smart blouse in her Whitehall office for our interview …. But ten years ago, when she started at [the Department of Health],
fresh from her political correspondent role at *GMTV*, her former boss’ advice was: ‘Wear your leather trousers on the first day.’ (230909/16/Defendinghealth)

Men were described less often in terms of specific physical attributes; instead, the overall impression they created, particularly in relation to client interaction, was a frequent topic.

Coca-Cola GB head of brand PR Joan O’Connor says Shah’s creativeness [sic], passion and quirkiness is a winning combination: ‘Raoul is very calming, but full of insight, ideas and perspective.’ (061109/16/naturalnetworker)

‘He is easy, direct and typically Scottish,’ adds Cotton. ‘He has not lost his accent or his affection for Scottish football and he is not backwards in saying his piece.’ (200309/14/easyhospitality)

**Discussion**

The results presented here show how *PRWeek* serves PR’s professional project by offering a clear and comprehensive set of archetypes that delimit the field, display model practices and practitioners, and define value and status in terms of objective structures (sector specialisms, client lists and financial worth). Jurisdiction is further reinforced by the fact that valid knowledge about PR originates from within the profession, with expert practitioners, while comment or perspectives from outside the field are marginalized. Where important challenges are identified, they are accompanied by implicit or explicit articulations of ways in which practitioners as individuals and as an occupational group might navigate or repudiate them (e.g. marking them as nonsensical or unjustified). The effect of such journalistic practices is to construct the taken-for-granted logic of the field where value/importance is measured in terms of business size or dominance, where service and loyalty to clients unquestioningly makes good sense, and where success is measured in terms of climbing professional hierarchies and proximity to powerful actors and organizations.

Previous research on occupational fields has confirmed that the circulation of archetypes through discourses such as these provides implicit guidelines for practitioners to structure their conduct within the occupational field (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Fournier, 1999; Grey, 1998; Hodgson, 2002). In this case, because the readership of *PRWeek* is the practitioner body, the disciplining effect of its coverage is to contribute to the construction of a relatively coordinated and consistent understanding across the field of what PR is, where it belongs, and how it should be practised. Such consistency should help to construct a corresponding understanding of PR beyond the boundaries of the occupational field, by providing evidence that the legitimacy claims inherent to the professional project are grounded in an apparent occupational reality.

However, the ongoing struggle for legitimacy faced by PR suggests there are flaws in the evidence for an archetypal field, indicating that there are limits to the effectiveness of this institutional subsystem (Hirsch, 1972). We suggest that this is a result of the business media imperative to deliver to a practitioner audience while simultaneously protecting the financial return that this audience represents. This means covering
occupational events and issues that align with the interests of symbolically valued actors in the field, and campaigning on important industry and professional issues in collaboration with others, for example on regulation of lobbying, or on evaluation (Pieczka, 2006). Because the only news reported in the publication relates to events within the occupational field, it has an internal coherence that ensures a consistent overall narrative for the reader. Facts that are likely to challenge this coherence come from outside the field, but such facts are less ‘newsworthy’ within the remit of the publication and are therefore excluded. Questions about the profession and its social or cultural effects, for example, are not valid because they introduce criteria for assessing the value of events and practices derived from external perspectives.

Such dynamics generate the insular approach to coverage that marks PRWeek and, we suggest, other trade magazines. As a result, they are more powerful in constructing archetypes that tend to align with the interests of powerful organizations and institutions in occupational fields than in offering a public, open space where alternative voices coexist or jostle for prominence and recognition. Tools for engaging in such debates, which are required when occupations claim legitimacy in the arena of public opinion, are not provided. Consequently, we argue that PR, as represented through PRWeek’s coverage, is a reactive and conservative occupational field: it adopts rather than challenges established values and norms, as we have seen with the traditionally gendered presentation of practitioners, and the emasculation of the potential for critique in some of the media genres used (readers’ letters, humorous or satirical gossip page).

To say that the nature of PRWeek’s discourse is reactive and conservative is not to say that the magazine consistently and deliberately sets out to act in reactive and conservative ways. Rather, this conclusion should inspire questions about the processes behind this effect. Previous studies of media have shown that representations of the world contained in media content may be illuminated by the study of economic structures, and organizational and professional practices involved in the production (Schudson, 1995, 2003). We have included in this article the little work that exists on the nature of this specific sector of the publishing industry. However, to understand more fully how the magazine comes to create its particular picture of the PR field, there is a need for ethnographic studies of journalistic practices and routines, and the relationship between journalists, editors and sources. Moreover, we have focused on a traditional medium, a print magazine with a professional editorial team; as new digital technologies reshape the media landscape, it may be time to study more systematically the discursive dynamics of the PR blogosphere.

This study also raises questions about change mechanisms in the PR field. Our findings demonstrate that PRWeek appears to play an important role in the institutionalization of PR by circulating and normalizing particular values, practices and knowledge shared by trade and professional associations. What it seems to be unable to do, therefore, is to offer an impetus for radical rather than incremental change. A systematic, historically sensitive study of trade media following up changes in discourses (understood here as generative paradigms) may offer an interesting insight into change dynamics in the field: in particular, the impetus for and the diffusion of change, and the role institutions, organizations and individual practitioners play in shaping how the field
develops. Such insights will also be relevant to other contexts. PR is one of many desirable professional and semi-professional occupations that represent a route to social mobility, but that remain relatively closed (Bolton and Muzio, 2007; Race for Opportunity, 2010; The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009; Witz, 1992). Revealing how norms are constructed through trade media will improve understandings of occupational closure at points of entry, as well as within fields, in terms of its effect on career development and progression.

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Notes

1. We define ‘public relations industry’ as referring to practices, the economic value generated by these practices, as well as the structured institutional and organizational arrangements in which the practice operates (PR consultancies and in-house arrangement for PR work).
2. The term ‘media’ here refers to journalistic media, rather than media more broadly conceived such as film or TV series. While we recognize that the latter also communicate images of PR, we argue that these are less relevant to the focus of this article.
3. The concern with ethics may reflect the jurisdictional struggle between journalism and PR over access to sources and information (Pieczka and L’Etang, 2006).
4. Our referencing for these extracts shows the date of the magazine’s issue as 240910 (24 September 2010); this is followed by page number and the first words of the story’s title.

References


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