



Images of PR special issue and the 2013 Barcelona International PR conference



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 February 2014

Accepted 25 February 2014

Available online 22 March 2014

Keywords:

Barcelona International PR Conference

Public Relations

Images

ABSTRACT

Now entering its fourth year, the Barcelona International Public Relations conference has, since it began in 2011, gathered a reputation for inclusiveness, openness, and reflection. In this latest set of articles, the conference's openness is visible in the very variety of the papers. This special issue confirms inclusiveness in augmenting contributions from the 2013 participants with articles from non-attendees. The Public Relations Review call for images of public relations drew some surprising submissions so, in the open spirit of the conference, we welcomed them into the refereeing process and they have helped to widen our range. Significantly, this year, although the potentially abstract topic of images of PR did not target applied contributions, most of the articles address practitioner issues – albeit of different kinds and with different levels of engagement. Finally, as the conference has matured, iconoclasm and innovation continue to be the other characteristic ingredients of a Barcelona mix that gives voice to those embracing rather than excluding controversy.

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1. Introduction

Reflection and iconoclasm both marked three of 2013's plenary panels: the first on the growing topic of the organization-public relationship (OPR) was convened by Professor Bob Heath under the title: "OPR: The journey to understand and champion OPR takes many roads, some not yet well traveled." It fed into the iconoclastic stream of the conference as speakers questioned current orthodoxies. Two papers in this special issue give a flavor of that panel and subsequent debate among the conference attendees. Coombs and Holladay's "Public Relations' 'Relationship Identity' in Research: Enlightenment or Illusion" put its challenge upfront in the title offering the option of current OPR research leading either to more enlightenment or to ongoing illusion. At once insightful, thoughtful and reflective, their work injects intelligent caution into the rush toward premature quantifications of relationships. They offer a set of healthy correctives by highlighting the necessarily fragile nature of these human interactions and for foregrounding the role of valuable and hard-to-measure but still influential factors (e.g., weak ties and parasocial contacts). Coombs and Holladay end with a call for greater transparency and greater honesty in how both practitioners and scholars handle organizations-public connections. This goes to the heart of their continuing project of developing an ethics of care to improve the profession and to show how PR can win back a reputation for integrity.

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Willis is another author who picks up on practical and theoretical OPR issues with vigor. His title likens current PR contributors to OPR as a caught in a contradiction that promotes their wine of knowledge with evangelic zest but ends up delivering less palatable and vinegary outcomes. Willis hones in on the disconnections between the extravagant claims of OPR researchers and the continuation of conflicting attitudes and practices in the theory in execution rather than the espoused theory. He critiques existing definitions of social media listening and links that to Macnamara's (2012) identification of the need for an architecture of actual listening as distinct from claiming credit for attending when the practice disguises surveillance or feeding off the vitality of online communities by lurking in the margins of authentic debates. Willis borrows George Orwell's notion of doublethink from 1984 to critique these contradiction while putting methodological and theoretical ways forward through Flyvbjerg's (2001) notion of phronesis and recent management applications of complexity science. Willis's concluding call for approaches to address the true complexities of relationship research with flexibility, grounded improvisation and situational sensitivity, reinforces the central emphases of Coombs and Holladay.

Barcelona 2013's second major panel, "Historical Representations of PR," was convened by Tom Watson and introduced temporal images into the conference through his review of the state of the art. Some of the ideas discussed appear in his *Public Relations Review* Special Issue on PR History. However, the third major plenary panel, "Shaping the Field: Bob Heath and the Two Volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Public Relations*," continued the temporal focus and provided the strongest impetus to self-reflection. The papers from the panel, supplemented by a contribution from Edwards, have been written up for this special issue and far from avoiding controversy, offer a series of independent but converging views not only on the state of PR as evidenced by Heath's two volumes but ideas about where the field should go and some principles and methods for taking it forward in inclusive fashion.

Other articles followed the conference theme of images of PR in – relatively – more conventional fashion. Tsetsura, Bentley, and Newcomb's "Idealistic and Conflicted: New Portrayals of Public Relations Practitioners in Film" updates classic cultivation analysis with a snapshot of ten 21st century films that feature representations of the profession in action. Although they disagree with the amount of media positivity identified by Ames (2010), they track a partial trend to more positive practitioner portrayals, integrate it with the results of Miller's (1999) article, and identify two new characteristics – *idealistic* and *conflicted* – to provide continuity and difference. Nevertheless, Tsetsura, Bentley, and Newcomb's project is more than just analysis for analysis sake (and academic publication). They link filmic types and stereotypes to practitioner advice in the form of practical recommendations for those in the profession. In a helpful conclusion, they point out how to extend PR representation studies through existing online databases and encourage further academic media and PR representation research for the good of the profession and its image.

Fitch's article moves PR images from 21st century film to television. Considering the PR of the Vampire Rights Amendment in Alan Ball's HBO series *True Blood*, she usefully complicates conventional coverage of PR representations by moving it into the genre of media vampires and the sophisticated scholarship deployed in the study of popular cultural artifacts in Cultural and Media Studies. *True Blood's* self-conscious parody of PR techniques, uses the absurd situation of equal rights and citizenship for vampires who have recently come out (of the coffin), through the development of synthetic blood. Entering its seventh series in 2014, *True Blood* has an enormous impact on popular culture and takes PR to people and places not normally considered in ironic and thought-provoking fashion. Fitch's analysis also helps PR scholarship to jump from a massive convergence on role models and gender, verisimilitude to women in the workplace, and glass ceiling obstructions to postfeminism, play with gender, and the implications of PR representations in popular culture. Fitch analyses how a vamp camp that can simultaneously celebrate queerness and offer critical insights in uncomfortable contexts where feminism and anti-feminism sit side by side. Her focus on the character of Nan Flanagan, vampire rights activist and spokesperson, provides interesting contrasts. Although Flanagan conforms to the stereotypical PR practitioner in being attractive, childless, middle class, single, and white, Fitch notes that rather than performing entry level and technical PR, Flanagan, without any love interest, drives the campaign for equal rights for vampires and is a consummate media spokesperson whose rational arguments oppose the emotional vitriol of her bigoted opponents. If, as has been claimed, vampires personify the age, then the introduction of Nan Flanagan as the PR vampire makes her a role model worth consideration.

A third article covering 21st century media representations, Xifra and Collell's comparative case study on the image of lobbying, has a startlingly unconventional opening. It introduces the thoughts of a contemporary French historiographer on whether Herodotus is best seen as an ethnographer or a historian. This leads into a discussion of two major challenges posed to historians of recent history: the lack of objectivity and the mass media revolution that has replaced the classic historian's shortage of sources with an abundance of mediated material. Building on that frame, they focus on media coverage of lobbying with an enlightening comparison of Frederick Wiseman's 2007 documentary *State Legislature* with Steven Soderbergh's 2003 ten-episode HBO television series. Xifra and Collell place their analysis of public relations occupational cultures in the context of different generic conventions and cinematic theory – especially paradocumentary and parafiction – as well as ancient Greek debates around the father of history to integrate perspective with recent representations in interpreting the coverage and practice of lobbying. In what is, therefore, an original contribution to the historiography of PR, Xifra and Collell conclude that both film makers belong, albeit indirectly, to the small canon of PR historians.

Davidson's "Everywhere and Nowhere: Theorizing and Researching Public Affairs and Lobbying within Public Relations Scholarship" shifts attention from qualitative analysis of screen lobbying by incorporating quantitative analysis of academic considerations of lobbying. Nevertheless, as with the PR and media articles, this piece has a focus on how the public image of public relations has implications for practice. Davidson reaffirms earlier calls for PR to make three strong claims: for lobbying to be core business for PR; for addressing the associated ethical and communicative implications of current lobbying; and

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