



## Resourcing the next stages in PR history research: The case for historiography



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### ABSTRACT

Since the start of the 21st century, significant work has been done in expanding not just the content, but the geographical, methodological, and social range of public relations scholarship. The expansion has parallels – a few of which we acknowledge below – in the body of historical work in the discipline. In this article, we contend that future research on PR pasts should seek to be relevant to three clusters of contemporary themes that feature strongly in mainstream history. Cluster one is the environmental context of globalization and associated geographical and social diversifications. Cluster two concerns the scale, methods, and ecological inclusiveness to engage with these changes; and, the third covers nation-centric mindsets, archival assumptions, and the impact of changing media. We also argue for PR historians resourcing the next stages of PR history from advances in historiography and history writing practices with particular attention to the point of view of the historian and awareness of the traditions and limitations, within which he, she, or they write. We suggest that this resourcing process will involve questioning assumptions of authority embedded in archive-centered PR research, decentering nation-bound narratives, re-evaluating notions of objectivity, and extending the field's temporal and spatial boundaries.

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### 1. Historiography challenges (1): global and social diversification

After 2000, the field's publications show a massive global expansion that includes public relations history. This is visible in the first two *Handbooks of Public Relations* (Heath, 2001, 2010) and the two editions of the *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* (Heath, 2005, 2013): both pairs of benchmarks significantly extend the international range and number of international contributors. Similarly, in systematic approaches that encourage histories, albeit in fairly short forms, of nations, Van Ruler and Verčič (2004) *Public relations and Communication Management in Europe: A Nation-by-Nation Introduction To Public Relations Theory and Practice* covered a number of European countries and the first two editions of the *Handbook of Global Public Relations* (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003, 2009) further globalized the coverage of contributors, nations, and regions. Eastern Europe has generated studies in econocentric and transitional public relations as, for example, in Lawniczak (2011) analysis of "The role of Pope John II as well as of some Polish political leaders in the transition process from socialism to market economy and political pluralism." In the PR history literature, the list of outputs from the International History of Public Relations Conferences (IHPRC) demonstrates allied expansions across content, method, and space.

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At the outset, even though we advocate different future directions for the next stage of PR history, we acknowledge the genuine progress made and pay tribute to those rare writers, both inside the discipline and outside of it, who worked, often in relative isolation, to accumulate enough literature to establish the foundations for a field. Without the outputs of these scholars, this article would not be possible. Historiography – especially its three key features as the theorizing of history, the point of view from which historians “make” their histories, and the study of the way history has been and is being written (including awareness of that history of history) – does intermittently feature in the field’s growth, but, we argue, it occupies too small a role. [Watson \(2013\)](#) keynote address at IHPRC, which summarized the state of the field, highlighted only a chapter in [McKie and Munshi \(2007\)](#) – although [Holtzhausen’s \(2012\)](#) chapter merits inclusion – an article by [L’Etang \(2008\)](#) and three recent relevant papers or discussions: [Lamme and Russell \(2010\)](#); and IHPRC presentations by [Bentele \(2012\)](#) and [Xifra and McKie \(2012\)](#). Accordingly, in order to establish a platform for future progress, we argue that the PR field needs to be cognizant with different approaches to historiography, to update its sources, and to adapt to associated developments in the broader historical field.

One area, where considerable public relations work is underway, concerns the “diversification of history” ([Lévesque, 2008](#), p. 10) that has “significantly increased knowledge” (p. 10) on previously marginal aspects (e.g., culture, gender, and society). This movement to widen the contents of the body of historical knowledge shifted concerns away from centers of political and government action onto the events and previously unrecognized accounts of everyday life and ordinary people. Traces of such diversification impacts can already be found in the PR, and, sometimes, in the PR history field. [Coombs and Holladay \(2011\)](#) reinstate activist public relations in one period in U.S. history and gender and race issues have increased their visibility (often with a historical dimension) (e.g., [Edwards, 2010](#); [Munshi, 2005](#); [Waymer, 2010](#)). In books, [L’Etang \(2004\)](#) restored government officials to the central role they played in advancing PR practices in Britain and [Toledano and McKie \(2013\)](#) recovered contributions from generations of Israeli practitioners in institutions as diverse as hospitals, museums and the Zionist moment. The annual IHPRC papers provide a particularly good example of encouraging contributions from previously unrepresented, or underrepresented, national histories as is evident in the 2011 conference proceedings with contributions on Jamaica, Latvia, the Philippines, Romania, Thailand, Uganda, and Vietnam ([Watson, 2011](#)).

One of the most influential evocations of the purpose of diversifying history was British working class historian [Thompson \(1966\)](#) aim to “rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘Utopian’ artisan, . . . from the enormous condescension of posterity” (p. 12). Often called history from below, the approach found kindred attempts by other historians restoring other historical actors (e.g., African Americans, indigenous peoples, women neglected or marginalized in conventional history). [Miller \(1999\)](#) book includes the voices of workers but we see it as part of diversification since its title makes its point of view explicit: *The Voice of Business: Hill & Knowlton and Postwar Public Relations*. Two public relations representative of history from elsewhere were [Straughan \(2007\)](#) edited collection, *Women’s Use of Public Relations for Progressive-Era Reform: Rousing the Conscience of a Nation*; and [Ewen \(1996\)](#) *PR! A Social History of Spin*, which “does for the maligned ‘muckrakers’ what Thompson does for the Luddites” by restoring them “as precursors of investigative journalists, who are today lauded as pillars of the fourth estate and supporters of democracy” ([McKie & Munshi, 2007](#), p. 131). [Holtzhausen \(2012\)](#), writing from a South African and U.S. perspective and using an abbreviated form of hypothetical history, asks thought-provoking questions:

So, “What if” our history is written through the lives of activists and not press agents? “What if” our common history emanated from resistance to British colonialism and not from P.T. Barnum, Ivy Lee, and Edward Bernays? “What if” our heroes are Thomas Jefferson, Margaret Sanger, Alexander Hamilton, members of the Civil Rights Movement, Emily Hobhouse, the African National Congress, and Nobel Peace Prizewinner Jody Williams. (p. 105)

Questions along these lines, let alone answers, are in short supply since the impact of diversification across PR histories remains limited. This is highlighted when national histories are excluded and we make even a cursory comparison with the cognate field of journalism. Journalism’s relative abundance of diverse titles on diverse histories includes: [Hutton and Straus Reed \(2002\)](#) edited collection *Outsiders in 19th-Century Press History: Multicultural Perspectives*, which offers an anthology of essays whose wide-ranging topics include pioneer Jewish journalism and Native American newspapers; [Gonzalez and Torres \(2011\)](#) *News for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media*, which has an extensive account of news media from the printing press to social media that puts race at the center of the history; and [Meadows \(2001\)](#) *Voices in the Wilderness: Images of Aboriginal People in the Australian Media*, which examines over two centuries of race relations and media representations in Australia. The ability to compare and contrast the influence of historic themes across disciplines is a useful way to evaluate the state of public relations histories and should be a feature of a maturing and outward-looking field.

Diversification has been confirmed as a major theme right across the spectrum of mainstream history since at least the 1960s. Recent contributions range from such radical collections as [Jenkins, Morgan, and Munslow’s \(2007a\)](#) *Manifestos for History*. The editors base the introductory chapter of the collection, “On Fidelity and Diversity,” as if historical veracity is called into doubt without diverse perspectives. For [Jenkins, Morgan, and Munslow \(2007b\)](#), the first “important point to make” (p. 1) is “there are always multiple versions rather than one vision of what history is or what it may become” (p. 1). This is reinforced by one volume we strongly recommend for resourcing the next stage of PR history: *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 5: Historical Writing since 1945* ([Schneider & Woolf, 2011a](#)) (henceforth referred to as *OHHW*).

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