Revisiting gendered assumptions of practitioner power: An exploratory study examining the role of social media expertise

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory study was to expand upon previous literatures in public relations power, and fill the need for more scholarship regarding practitioners' perceptions of social media work, power, and gender. Findings from a survey of PRSA members showed that there is a gendered difference in power perception between males and females regardless of their PR roles or level of experience, but social media expertise was perceived equally between both genders. We argue that while social media expertise may serve to reduce a gendered power divide in public relations, continued critical exploration of social media and gender inequality is necessary.

1. Introduction

The public relations profession has long been an inviting, yet challenging climate for women. Although women comprise 75% of public relations industry jobs, they occupy only 20% of leadership positions (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Furthermore, the PRSA Work, Life, and Gender Report shows that the salary gap between male and female practitioners is considerably pronounced and getting worse (Sha, 2011). The disparity of women practitioners in power and salary may be due to gendered divisions of labor and gendered role prescriptions that continue to exist. Yet, as the PR industry evolves amidst the influx of social media, does this provide for more equal role prescriptions and opportunities for advancement?

Past research has been inconclusive. Recent scholarship by Smith and Place (2013), Place, Smith and Lee (2016) and Neill and Lee (2016) suggested that social media expertise led to an increase of power for public relations professionals. Sweetser and Kelleher (2011) studied social media and leadership roles for public relations professionals and found no significant differences between men and women in terms of leadership expertise. However, research by Bridgen (2011) and Keating (2016) suggest that social media work requires more time-intensive and emotional labor that may impact individuals' work-life balance and further instigate gender in-equalities. Such conflicting results assume continued research is necessary to further explore how the influx of social media labor in public relations affects practitioners' meaning-making and sense of power and gender equality (Fitch & Third, 2014; Keating, 2016).

Thus, this study expands upon previous studies on public relations power and fills the need for more scholarship regarding practitioners' perceptions of social media work, power, and gender. Specifically, we surveyed PRSA members in the public relations industry on the perceptions of their power, their level of social media expertise, and their experience in the public relations profession. Results from this exploratory study showed that there is a difference in power perception between gender, with social media potentially serving as an equalizing force. We argue that social media expertise may serve to reduce a gendered power divide in public relations; however, we caution that continued critical exploration of social media and gender inequality in public relations is

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necessary.

2. Literature review

2.1. Workplace roles and gender in public relations

Roles theory has explored how public relations industry roles affect ways in which practitioners communicate, delegate workplace responsibilities, are perceived within an organization, and demonstrate power. Scholars and practitioners have traditionally divided public relations roles using Dozier's (1984) two categories: the technician role and the manager role. Technician role skills often comprise the core of public relations work, such as writing and production of organizational messages (Berger & Heyman, 2005; Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995) whereas manager skills often comprise the evaluation of research and the formulation of strategic recommendations (Dozier et al., 1995). Although practitioners often perform both types of roles simultaneously (Moss, Newman & DeSanto, 2005), the manager role is most commonly associated with influence and power (Berger, 2005).

Such a roles dichotomy holds gendered and rank-based implications, as it has reduced public relations functions into a "hierarchy of two seemingly dissimilar roles" (Creedon, 1991, p. 79). The technician-manager dichotomy may not adequately illustrate the multiple responsibilities or diverse work roles of public relations professionals (Creedon, 1991; Moss & Green, 2002; Moss, Warnaby & Newman, 2000). Creedon, therefore, has suggested for the linking, instead of ranking, of roles.

Feminist and gender theory in public relations has long addressed the gendered role prescriptions and inequalities of the public relations industry, many of which emerged in the wake of its transition to a women's majority status in the 1970s (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Cline et al., 1986; Creedon, 1991; Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2001; Toth & Cline, 1989). Theorizing has focused particularly on how constructions of gender affect individuals' social, work, and power relations (Aldoory, 2005). Women practitioners, in particular, became marginalized as a result of affirmative action policies that disproportionately hired them into the public relations profession (Golombisky, 2015; Grunig et al., 2001) predominately in technical positions that lacked skills development and mentoring support. Additionally, women have been socialized to demonstrate stereotypically feminine traits, such as caring, whereas men have been socialized to demonstrate stereotypically masculine traits, such as dominance and strength (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Hon, 1995). In turn, public relations has been stereotyped as a "Velvet Ghetto" in which women are overrepresented in technical positions with diminished status, salaries, and power (Creedon, 1991; Cline et al., 1986; Grunig et al., 2001; Krider & Ross, 1997; Toth & Cline, 1989). Meanwhile, as excellent public relations has become increasingly associated with management role prescriptions (Dozier et al., 1995), such an association may have further solidified gendered divisions of labor as women lacked access to more highly regarded and sought-after management positions.

Gendered assumptions of public relations practitioners have thus created lasting effects on the power structures, individual role prescriptions, and advancement opportunities in the public relations industry (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Hon, 1995; Wrigley, 2002). The glass ceiling, for example, refers to the overarching invisible and often unspoken organizational barrier to individuals' advancement and workplace equality (Wrigley, 2002). However, as the nature of the public relations industry evolves to accommodate social media-based role prescriptions and more integrated organizational structures, such changes may afford new opportunities for empowerment and gender equality.

Very few studies have explored the gendered division of public relations work in social media contexts or capacities. Most recently, Neill and Lee (2016) surveyed public relations professionals to find evidence of gender differences in social media work. Women, more often than men, were found to enact social media technician roles and were more actively engaged in social media work on the whole. Bridgen (2011) suggested that the personal, emotional, "portable" and 24/7 nature of social media work, often conducted at home, could contribute to gendered inequalities (p. 73). She further suggested that the increased importance placed upon social media work would evolve its association from a technician role prescription to a management role prescription, thus embodying a more stereotypically masculine ideology (p. 73). Keating (2016) suggested that the emotional and "low-profile" nature of social media work may compound gendered inequalities in regard to work/life fit and care responsibilities (p. 25, 28). She urged for increased critical inquiry regarding social media's effect on divisions of labor in public relations.

2.2. Social media engagement and public relations power

Social media management is undoubtedly a prominent function for public relations practitioners. According to a recent practitioner survey (N = 329) by Wright and Hinson (2015), approximately 43% of public relations professionals spend anywhere between 11% ~ 25% of their daily working time to manage blogs and other social media accounts. More importantly, they agreed that social media has enhanced the practice of public relations overall. The exponential growth of social media has signaled an expanded role for public relations, including various social media technician and management roles (Neill & Lee, 2016). Neill and Lee (2016) suggest that social media enable professionals to perform management role prescriptions and to exhibit strategic thinking skills, as well as enact influence at various levels of an organization. Social media's direct and interpersonal connective capacity also stands to grant public relations more recognition within communication management because of the function's focus on the broad range of stakeholders that legitimize an organization. For example, Smith and Place (2013) found that public relations professionals gain power through the use of social media in communication structures that prioritize stakeholder relationship management. Motion, Heath, and Leitch (2015) also explain that social media provides strategic opportunities for providing the public with relevant, targeted information, making the provided information not only socially redeeming but also valuable to them. Such relevant knowledge "supports and enables the exercise of power, while the exercise of power generates and legitimates knowledge"