

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Queen Margaret University
Unit of Assessment: UoA 36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management
Title of case study: The scope of professional influence and autonomy: enacting communication expertise through public relations practice – critical interventions.
1. Summary of the impact

This case generated new ways of thinking among a self-selecting sample of ‘senior’ PR practitioners and delivered personal autonomy and professional development. The term ‘senior’ is commonly employed in PR practice and formed the basis for discussion on practitioner conceptualisation of professional expertise. Critical interventions extracted practitioner accounts of their work, methodologies and impacts, and changes in critical, conceptual thinking took place. The project created an awareness of subjectivity in everyday practice among a collective category of workers with regard to their information and knowledge expertise, with implications for the practice community and wider society.

2. Underpinning research

The project’s starting point was the work of Pieczka (2002, **2006, 2007**) Pieczka & L’Etang (2001, **2006**), and L’Etang (1999, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2011) which explored conceptual, sociological, ethical and historical aspects of PR professionalism and professionalisation. These outputs have led the way in situating these topics conceptually and critically rather than in functional terms. Pieczka & L’Etang (2001, **2006**) was published in *The Sage Handbook of PR*, one of a well-established series of international social science collections that seek to define the parameters of a field of study. L’Etang’s history of British PR as a professional practice has been described as ‘seminal’ and her work on historical methodology (2008) has been frequently cited. It also links to themes of professional evaluation and impacts relating to PR which have been previously explored (Puchan, Pieczka & L’Etang, 1999). The project drew on wider literature on PR role and scope, PR practitioners’ enactment of managerial concepts and capabilities (Moss, Warnaby & Newman, 2000; Moss & DeSanto, 2011) and issues surrounding the evaluation practices of PR practitioners including: ROI and Advertising Equivalents (Watson, 2005, 2011, 2012, 2013; Simmons & Watson, 2005; Xavier et al, 2005; Watson & Likely, 2013). Internationally, few have explored questions of professionalism; a rare exception is a professor from the Netherlands (van Ruler, 2005) who cited some of the underpinning research by those submitted in the UoA.

While a well developed stream of work in PR investigates ‘knowledge’ in relation to the enactment of hierarchically defined roles (manager/technician) from a largely strategic management perspective, Pieczka’s work has drawn on sociology of work and sociology of professions to explore the question of professional knowledge in PR in the context of the PR professional project, by investigating a range of conceptual tools routinely employed in practice and made visible through accounts of evaluation and objectives set for the work (Pieczka, 2002). This analysis was subsequently extended to investigate accounts of professional work presented through a popular *genre* of a best practice case study (2007), identifying the influence of the discourse of professionalism in the way in which expert knowledge is understood and fused with professional action.

The recasting of PR practitioners as technologists of discourse (Leitch and Motion 1997, Weaver et al 2006), rather than communication managers (Grunig 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002), brought with it a new impetus to consider the role and impact of PR practice in terms of how it shapes social identities and relations. In this context, understanding of the nature of knowledge routinely used in practice, as well as the question about the degree of autonomy conferred by professional expertise on the PR professional, or conversely, the malleability of PR practice to other kinds of knowledge present in institutional contexts where PR work is negotiated and delivered, take on a new meaning.

Research was conducted as part of the study (L’Etang and Powell, 2013) and underpinned impact throughout the process. Interventions were conducted by L’Etang, Powell and Pieczka. A working paper providing an overview of the research behind the impact was uploaded in December 2013.

3. References to the research

Underpinning research was published in an international peer-reviewed article (Pieczka, 2007); a conference paper awarded a Top Paper prize at the International Communication Association Conference (May, 2008); a chapter in an edited book (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006) and in a working paper (L'Etang and Powell, 2013).

Pieczka, M. (2008) The disappearing act: PR consultancy in research and theory, Top Paper, PR Division, paper presented at the International Communication Association conference, 22-26 May.

Pieczka, M. (2007) Case studies as narrative accounts of PR practice. *Journal of PR Research*, 19(4), 333-356.

Pieczka, M. (2006) 'PR expertise in practice'. In L'Etang, J. & Pieczka, M. (Eds.) *PR: critical debates and contemporary practice*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 279–302.

Pieczka, M. (2006). "Chemistry" and the PR industry: an exploration of the concept of justice and issues arising'. In L'Etang, J. & Pieczka, M. (Eds.) *PR: critical debates and contemporary practice*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 303–330.

L'Etang, J. & Powell, M. (2013) Accessing PR expertise: methodological considerations', *Synthesis*, Working Paper Series of the Division of Media, Communication and Performing Arts, December.

4. Details of the impact

The project had an impact on a sample of senior PR practitioners in Scotland in relation to enabling critically-reflexive understanding of the practice and its underpinning concepts, the nature of their expertise, their self-understanding as a creative service provider in contemporary society and the community of practice within which they are situated. The impacts have a range of implications for individuals, their organizations and professional bodies.

The project co-constructed new understanding and practices that effected changes in self-understanding beneficial to individuals and the practice community. It facilitated emergent meanings and discourses that began to generate new ways of thinking about their work. These changes were reported instantaneously by some practitioners in response to the initial semi-structured qualitative interviews/focus groups and captured subsequently in email correspondence and follow-up interventions. Impacts included reflexive understandings of occupational roles and feedback received emphasised that practitioners found interviews and focus groups to be 'therapeutic', 'thoroughly stimulating', and 'what the professional bodies should be doing'. It appeared that the research process allowed practitioners to share frustrations, the peaks and troughs of their emotional labour (Yeomans, 2007) and to raise questions about the nature of professional roles and professional bodies.

Project design took place in January 2013 with preparatory informal discussions and interviews in February, March and April. A researcher began work in June and interventions and impacts gathered and assessed throughout the project on an iterative basis (up to five face-to-face meetings with each volunteer over the course of the project). Dissemination to the practitioner community took place from November onwards (including Thought Leadership article in *International PR Association Journal*; presentations to professional bodies). A working paper that reviewed the pilot study and impacts was submitted to *Synthesis* (the working paper series for the Media, Communications and Performing Arts Division), uploaded in December 2013 and made available through the institutional e-repository.

Strategies and processes to enable impact

The project investigated practitioner understandings of knowledge in practice specifically in relation to processes of evaluation and the conceptualization of value. Biographical data provided insights into career trajectories and progression, personal development opportunities and promotion and conceptualizations of senior status within the occupation. Understanding the attitudes, behaviours and specific practices of PR practitioners in relation to research-based practice, including the evaluation of PR impacts, was important. The project involved liaison with professional bodies, such as the Chartered Institute of PR (CIPR) and the PR Consultants' Association (PRCA) in Scotland and the use of CIPR databases within Scotland. CIPR publicised the study and helped to recruit participants, incentivising this by offering CPD points for participation in all stages.

The investigation sought to delineate how practitioners understand the connection between certain types of knowledge and expertise in relation to their linguistic and symbolic work and its societal impacts. The ways in which practitioners translate knowledge capital into discourse and influence was explored and the implications of this for professional standing and society more widely was taken into consideration. Relationships among practitioners, specifically the nature of the community of practice and ideas about professionalism, professionalisation, the role of professional bodies and the notion of professional practice, were examined. Taking into consideration responses from initial informal conversations and more formal interviews and focus groups, the project made further critical interventions in the population with a small study sample, offering free choices about the form of intervention. These included personal journals, prescribed reading around identified issues, analytical exercises, and in all cases, reflective discussion. The overwhelming preference was for one-to-one follow-up tailored to needs identified by practitioners but contextualised conceptually by the research team to include key areas such as evaluation, creativity, and reflexive and critical thinking.

This case contributed self-understanding and insights that could influence future practice among creative service providers (PR/communications practitioners), professional bodies and clients. In addition to reported individual interventions and the proactive interest of professional organisations it is expected that there will be longer-term impact as researchers and participants collaborate within professional networks to facilitate critical analysis and occupational change.

The evidence is self-reported from individual practitioners at a personal level in terms of insights and personal impressions and from professional bodies in terms of requests for further involvement in the context of providing support and discursive contexts for senior practitioners. Although the research team questioned the PR concept of 'senior practitioner' it became clear in the course of the project that this cohort lacked concepts and language to articulate their expertise and that the published literature had so far failed to capture this or to engage practitioners themselves in more conceptual reflection and deeper level engagements/learning. Typically research into practice has focused on description of roles or techniques or prescriptive recommendations. This study sought to engage practice by creating an environment for reflexive development and critique.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

The sources are individual practitioners and members and/or representatives of professional bodies in Scotland. These are listed overleaf with details of their employment, professional role and contacts. All of the cited collaborators were involved in the study including the iterative interventions.

Impact at the individual level comprised reflexive engagement with professional and organisational roles and personal development that enabled individuals to acknowledge and conceptualise challenges faced in the execution of their expertise. This provided those individuals with an outlet, insights and greater autonomy, and independent judgement over professional constraints.

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Quotations from participants:

Senior Practitioner 1: 'It made me think ... about what I do on a daily basis'.

Senior Practitioner 2: 'From my own point of view I found the experience hugely valuable and would love to be able to do it more regularly...I know everybody else found it very interesting too I've had emails from most of them already'.

Senior Practitioner 3: 'Very keen to continue supporting this research...the idea of a leadership programme in Scotland...a think tank of leaders working to raise profile of the profession...'

Senior Practitioner 4: 'Working on this project has given me the opportunity to reflect on how I can keep up to date with new and tried & tested ways of carrying out PR at a strategic level. The project has introduced me to a variety of tools and techniques that help me challenge how I do things which not only reconfirms established practices as robust, but also introduces some new ideas. I have found the project immensely helpful for my own personal development and I hope my experiences will give an insight as to how senior practitioners can continue to learn even after many years working in the profession.'

Impact at the level of professional bodies comprised realization that professional development was limited to junior/entry level training and that there was value in the academically-driven interventions that took practitioners outside professional routines. Feedback from professional bodies indicated the desire to collaborate with academics to develop sessions for senior level practice. For example, the researchers and the Chair of CIPR Scotland (2012-14) will lead a workshop and discussion at the annual conference of the Association for Media Education in Scotland (AMES) in May 2014.

Impact at the level of professional body in terms of depth of engagement with and collaboration between the academy

The Case Study claims impact in terms of the depth of engagement and collaborative relations between the academy and the practice in terms of basic research and professional development. Traditionally, relations between the occupation and its professional bodies and academia have been focused on teaching or consultancy and skills, rather than knowledge and expertise. As ideas from progressive research encounters emerged onto the agenda of professional bodies and became a topic for discussion, a new level of engagement between academia and practice was catalyzed and evidenced.

Quotation from Chair of CIPR Scotland 2013:

'The research which we are working with [at] Queen Margaret University (QMU) is a pilot study and will be crucial to understand the routes to PR, what practitioners do at work and in essence, we hope to better understand the needs and requirements of practitioners in this day and age. We know the research will provide us [with] valuable insight and CIPR Scotland is committed to assisting... in the process. CIPR in Scotland is progressing, growing and beginning to inspire practitioners and it's our duty to ensure we can provide them with skills and knowledge to develop professionally. We can't do this if we don't understand them. I am excited to work with the team at QMU on this study and look forward to getting to a stage when we can discuss feedback from practitioners and try to action points raised. I'd...like to thank...QMU for funding this research. It will provide value to anyone in Scotland who is involved in PR and communications.'