

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 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. We suggest that this would involve questioning assumptions of authority embedded in archive-centered PR research, decentering nation-bound narratives, reevaluating notions of objectivity, and extending the field's temporal and spatial boundaries.

Key Words: Public relations, history, historiography, ecology, globalization, nation

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 first two *Encyclopedias 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's (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. In the PR history literature, the list of outputs from the International History of Public Relations Conferences (IHPRC) alone demonstrates allied expansions across content, method, and space.

At the outset, even though we advocate different future directions, we acknowledge the genuine progress made and pay tribute to those few 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 of PR history. Without the outputs of these scholars, this article would not be possible. However, although historiography, as the theorizing of history, also features in the growth, it occupies too small a role. Watson's (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 McKie and Xifra (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 significant 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., Munshi, 2005; Edwards, 2010; 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 E. P. Thompson's (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. A public relations representative of history from elsewhere was Ewen's (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 particularly noticeable when national histories are excluded and even a cursory comparison is made with the cognate field of journalism. Journalism's relative abundance of diverse titles on diverse histories includes: Hutton and Straus Reed's (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 Morgan, Jenkins 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 Morgan et al. (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*).

Part of a massive five volume project with over 1,500,000 words, this final volume offers 32 chapters plus an introduction and epilogue. In total, this fifth volume features 36 different authors, selected by an eminent editorial board as experts in their fields, who then had to have their chapters critiqued by other expert historians and revised in the light of those critiques. The chapters include such topics as "Women's and Gender History (Des Jardins, 2011); "African Historical Writing" (Falola, 2011); and "Settler Histories and Indigenous Pasts: New Zealand and Australia" (Attwood, 2011). The editors' introduction provides an even stronger argument than Morgan et al. (2007) for diversification not only in the present but into the foreseeable future: "What is apparent is that the progressive fissuring and refissuring of the historical field along multiple fault lines is likely to continue, as party, race, gender, religion, ethnicity, class, and ideology continue to vie for dominance" (Schneider & Woolf, 2011b, p. 1).

2. Historiography challenges (2): Questions of scale, method, and ecological inclusiveness

In addition to its sheer scale and quality, we recommend Schneider and Woolf's (2011a) *OHHW* for a number of other reasons: because its authors critically reflect on the purpose of history; because they make valiant attempts at future-proofing through reading trends and extrapolating from them; and because they tackle issues with an awareness of expanding media influences on

history. All are invaluable for PR historians who are willing, firstly, to examine state of the art meditations on fundamental issues involved in writing any kind of history; and secondly, to seek how to best align with advances and challenges as they have recently surfaced in mainstream historiography. Both are exemplified in Megill's (2011) magisterial "Epilogue: On the Current and Future State of Historical Writing":

One of the most important tasks of the historian is to help us see the work in which we live within the larger frame of human history. The greatest historians offer us . . . insight into how human life in the present differs from human life in the past. As for those of us who are under-labourers in the discipline of history, we adhere to a set of practices that presumes close familiarity with historical sources. And so, fearing the charge of dilettantism, we feel driven to focus our research and writing on *one* country, *one* period, *one* theme. Consequently, the past of which we speak is usually a small segment of the entire known human past. (p. 678)

Megill's (2011) epilogue that goes on to exhort expansion is exemplary but not exceptional. Over the last half-century historians have dramatically increased their range in practice as they move beyond small national histories to "World History," "Big History," and "Environmental History." The remarkable evolution of World History is instructive in this regard. While world-covering breadth has long existed in popular history books, its integration into mainstream academic history has been relatively recent. The surge of interest in the second half of the 20th century started slowly and emerged in part from Western Civilization courses. One seminal text was W. H. McNeill's (1963) *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, in which he aspired to position Western civilization as part of a broader human context. World History grew dramatically over the last twenty years with a number of significant titles – see Moore (1997) for a pre-2000 summary – and became impossible to ignore with the publication of the second edition of the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History* (W. H. McNeill et al., 2010). This collection had reached a five-volume first edition by 2005 and was enlarged to a six-volume second edition just five years later as World History also found inclusion as a chapter in major thematic anthologies (e.g., Bentley, 1997; Schneider & Woolf, 2011a).

"Big History" has had a similar trajectory and has continuities with World History, especially through the participation of W. H. McNeill in writing the foreword to both editions of one of its key books. Surfacing a couple of decades after McNeill's (1963) book, Big History also partly emerged from tertiary teaching in the 1980s with David Christian's courses in Australia. It then found prominent publications in the two editions of Christian's (2005; 2011) *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (both with a foreword by McNeill). Big History proponents distinguish their field from its world history predecessor through its unprecedented scale. As Christian (1991), appropriately enough in an early issue of the *Journal of World History*, made the case for Big History by arguing "that the appropriate time scale for the study of history may be the whole of time. In other words, historians should be prepared to explore the past on many different timescales up to that of the universe itself – a scale of between 10 and 20 billion years" (p. 223)

Twenty years on, Christian (2011) can simply begin with the Big Bang and provide an account of the ecosystem and how humans came to interact with the natural world through an

interdisciplinary mix that includes not just archaeology and population studies but cosmology, geology, and environmental studies. Other notable contributors who cover similar territory in similar ways include Speir's (1996) *The Structure of Big History: From the Big Bang until Today* and Brown's (2007). *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*. Environmental History as a historical subject, as well as featuring more and more prominently in World History and Big History, has been an expanding historical theme in its own right (McNeill, 2011). We fear when the time comes to write the history of public relations and the environment, the profession will not emerge positively. That may well be the best reason to commence the history urgently so that we can begin issues management to come to terms with the roles we have played across time before there is a crisis in public confidence. In the meantime, Bentele's (2012) model of historical stages, in which he takes an evolutionary perspective to range from the pre-history of public relations in the interpersonal communication of early mankind, through Antiquity and the Middle Ages, before identifying PR as an emerging occupational field in the 19th century, remains the closest to a Big PR History approach.

Alongside the need for diversification in content and geographical range, there are insistent calls for a spread of plural methods to address these different conditions. Edited collections by Jenkins et al. (2007) and Schneider and Woolf's (2011a) *OHHW* are typical of major movements in the history field that accept the reality of a diversity of methods and theories and, indeed, even the inadequacy of settling for any single best way. For Jenkins et al. (2007b): "Just as there can never be one authorised version of the past, so there can be no single methodological way of bringing that past to us as history" (p. 1). Similarly, for Schneider and Woolf (2011b), the whole contested and fissured field they identify is "now further complicated by postmodern doubts about the very possibility of historical knowledge beyond the filter of language" (p. 1). The linguistic or textual turn is recognised in the wider public relations literature but still has little visibility in the PR history literature (c.f., Holtzhausen, 2012).

The methodological issue has been further complicated – as in Curthoys and Docker's (2010) challenging title *Is History Fiction?* – because since the work of Hayden White (see McKie & Munshi, 2007) – historians have found it difficult to theoretically distinguish historians' stories from other openly-fictional stories. In *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)*, Harvard historian Simon Schama (1991) deliberately mixed historical sources with fiction to draw attention to the similarities between literature and history writing in terms of creative licence to make things up. It is now widely accepted that much history has to be invented, forged, or fashioned so that Robert Berkhofer (2008), Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, entitles his book *Fashioning History: Current Practices and Principles*. In line with the diversification movement in history, Berkhofer (2008) further observes how "Oral historians query workers, soldiers, women, minorities, and other members of the subordinated and exploited for the view 'from the bottom up' or 'from below' in order to get a glimpse of a past not otherwise documented" (p. 41). He goes so far as to consider this shift as a methodological improvement through Jesse Lemisch's claim that "sympathy for the powerless brings us closer to objectivity" (cited in Berkhofer, 2008, p. 59).

PR's considerations of objectivity remain, in the main, more derivative of methods in the natural sciences. They do not often align with a social justice perspective as a contributor to reducing subjectivity. Other fields, including historians and social scientists, are openly interested and

biased in favor of desired outcomes. Some openly commit to “morally necessary” (Curthoys & Docker, 2010, p. 377) research that serves humanity and the environment and working “in the service of human co-operation in the interests of the planet” that demands “loyalty not to country but to Earth” (Robin & Steffen, 2007, p. 1712). In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the anonymous author finds it impossible that “Given the plurality of voices within the ‘philosophy of history’” to “give one definition of the field that suits all these approaches” and concludes that “it is misleading to imagine that we refer to a single philosophical tradition when we invoke the phrase, ‘philosophy of history’” (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/history/>). Other recent historical theorizing on methods also refuses assumptions of objectivity to foreground imaginative invention and empathy. According to Berkhofer (2008), the “historical method does not produce histories, only statements that can be used in a history. The procedures do not even produce a story or argument as such” (p. 47). As a result, each history “navigates the tension among the many grander and lesser goals historians and others pursue in representing the past as history” (p. 47) to produce “an organized or synthesized totality” (p. 47).

Berkhofer’s (2008) “grander or less goals” could be productively applied to public relations historians. Mainstream historians have already produced a “synthesized totality” (p. 47) not just of individual historical accounts but of the goals and outcomes of modern history itself. Lévesque’s (2008) call for the end of history “focused exclusively on the political theory of the nation state” (p. 10) is part of a wider movement. As Geary (2003) notes, the field of modern “history was born in the nineteenth century, conceived and developed as an instrument of European nationalism” (p. 15) and concludes that, while it served to legitimize the field and “as a tool of nationalist ideology, the history of Europe’s nations was a great success . . . it has turned our understanding of the past into a toxic waste dump, filled with the poison of ethnic nationalism” (p. 15).

In support of his claim, Geary (2003) situates Slobodan Milosevic as part of this toxic legacy through the former Serb leader’s mobilization of a mythic early Serbian history. Milosevic’s self-interested evocation of a united “Serb people,” who in fact predated present day ethnic identities and did not then exist, was done in order to lay claim to the territory held by other ethnic groups (p. 7). Even when there is no territory in dispute, national histories are vital to defining nations and are what Anderson (1991) calls “imagined communities.” The fashioners of history, and they include PR practitioners, have been only too visible in the last two Olympic opening ceremonies: Beijing gave the world a lesson on China’s past in 2008; and a less official, and more cinematic, 2012 London ceremony presented a more idiosyncratic vision of Britain’s past. As public relations history plays catch up with accumulating its own national histories, it will be important to bear these lessons in mind for ethnic minorities everywhere and for stateless nations lacking the communication resources of established states (Xifra & McKie, 2013).

As globalization continues to diminish the importance of national boundaries, historians face challenges in coping with an enlarging environment without the theoretical crutches of an impossible objectivity, archival authority, and a national purpose. On its book jacket, Furtado’s (2013) *Histories of Nations: How Their Identities Were Forged* tries to avoid the “uniform narrative, written usually from a single writers point of view” and the associated nation-centric viewpoint: “In order to get to grips with the national and cultural differences that both enliven and endanger our world, . . . [and thus] above all to understand different national viewpoints”:

National history is a vital part of national self-definition. Most books on the history of the world try to impose a uniform narrative, written usually from a single writer's point of view. *Histories of Nations* is different: it presents 28 essays written by a leading historian as a self-portrait of his or her native country, defining the characteristics that embody its sense of nationhood. The countries have been selected to represent every continent and every type of state, large and small, and together they make up two-thirds of the world's population. They range from mature democracies to religious autocracies and one-party states, from countries with a venerable history to those who only came into being in the 20th century. In order to get to grips with the national and cultural differences that both enliven and endanger our world, we need above all to understand different national viewpoints to read the always engaging and often passionate accounts given.

3. Historiography challenges (3): What is (public relations) history for?

The questioning of nation-centered history raises issues other than racism. Consider the following two definitions and think which offers the best fit with your worldview. The first defines a nation as “a historically constituted stable community of people, formed out of the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture”; and the second sees a nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” When we posed this question to an audience at the 2012 International History of Public Relations conference, the majority opted for the first definition. In fact, the first comes from Joseph Stalin's (1913/2013, p. 12) once-influential book on *Marxism and the National Question* and the second from Anderson's (1991, p. 224) intellectually-influential book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*.

In aligning with Anderson (1991), we see national identity as fluid, constantly under construction, and capable of changing and being changed. And this, recent historiography suggests, is equally true of history. At this time of economic, environmental, and social fluidity, we recommend Bauman's (2006) work on *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* as another theoretician who has much to offer PR historians in ways of engaging with flux. Otherwise, we fear much public relations history may calcify, in line with its positivist U.S. heritage, not just into archival searches and fact-finding but a form of unsustainable pseudo-objectivity. However, the unthinking acceptance of seeming objectivity has cost the field too much already and serves to inhibit debates on the purpose of public relations history. Let us be clear that that we still acknowledge that accurate and reliable sources are, and should remain, a vital part of history, that public relations history (e.g., L'Etang, 2004; Anthony, 2012) has made excellent use of research drawn from various archives, and that we support initiatives underway to gather and explore other depositories of PR sources (notably at the University of Bournemouth).

However, although archival work can, and should, continue to feature in researches into PR's past, PR historians need also to attend to historiography. Historiographical theory has, for example, called into question assumptions of authority and ideas of history that often underpin work drawn from archives. This questioning is increasing in urgency as new forms of archives and knowledge management expand in the time of Web 2.0. Couldry and Hepp (2013) promote

the term “mediatization” in an attempt to capture “the broad consequences for everyday life and practical organization (social, political, cultural, economic) of media, and more particularly of the pervasive spread of media contents and platforms through all types of context and practice” (p. 191). Historical practice is not exempt from mediatization practices as archive contents are transferred into digital collections that can be held in the cloud; nor do historical theories ignore these changes (e.g., Blouin & Rosenberg, 2011).

Since ancient Greece and Rome, archives have been the literal lodging place of important legal and political records. For Derrida (1996), working from the etymology of “archive” as the residence, or main office of government (from the Greek “arkheion,” meaning public records, which was developed out of the domicile of the “archon” or ruler), the location of the archives became the place where the guardians of past records contributed to the maintenance of social order. Over time that has evolved, or mutated, in ways that led to archives being recognized as having authority in themselves and being the location of authentic or true records. Yet what expert election analyst and statistician Nate Silver (2012) states about numbers has considerable application to archival records: “The numbers have no way of speaking for themselves. We speak for them. We imbue them with meaning” (p. 9) and concludes that “Before we demand more of our data, we need to demand more of ourselves” (p. 9).

The dubious fusion of archives, history theory, and scientific objectivity reached a high point in the 19th century and linked up with European historians seeking to claim scientific status for their field: by 1862, Frenchman Fustel de Coulanges claimed that “History is and should be a science” (cited in Hoffer, 2008, p. 2); the famous German Leopold von Ranke “ordered his students to report on the past ‘as it really happened’” (p. 2); and four decades later the eminent English history professor J. B. Bury was teach his students that “It has not yet become superfluous to insist that history is a science” (p. 2). As part of this project, archives had become “privileged locations for determining historical truth [and] . . . a critical element in Rankean positivism and the new ‘objectivity’” (Blouin & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 8). As many in the public relations field see PR as a science it is salutary for the field’s historians to attend to the 1931 statement of the obvious by that early relativist, historian Carl Becker:

living history, the ideal series of events that we affirm and hold in our memory, since it is so intimately associated with what we are doing and with what we hope to do, cannot be precisely the same for all at any given time, or the same for one generation as for another Each of us is subject to the limitations of time and place. (cited in Hoffer, 2008, p. 3)

Hoffer’s (2008) comment immediately after the citation is equally telling: “In short, the ‘reality of the [historical] situation’ may be ours more than the evidence’s” (p. 3) so we do well to demand more of our selves regardless of the seeming solidity of the archive and its documents.

Archival based authorities are further tested in Derrida’s (1996) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Derrida evokes the relationship between the impact of electronic media and psychological process while establishing how archives are physical public buildings that hold records and also repositories of private diaries, love letters and other personal, and even intimate, accounts. These can be every bit as indiscrete and salaciously shocking as a 21st century blog. Derrida offers his distinctive perspective on how an increasingly ubiquitous and all-pervading

electronic media, particularly email, is transforming both private and public spheres. It is a theme that connects with the availability of resources electronically to underwrite the range required to write World History in an informed fashion. Big History is similarly likely to gain attention outside the discipline because of Bill Gates' involvement in the Big History Project (<https://course.bighistoryproject.com/>). That project has created an interactive portal for students to engage with Big History's expansive and interdisciplinary mindset. In the meantime, we have a recommendation for a nuanced and research-relevant consideration of changing archival practices, partly stimulated by electronic curation, and the interplay between history and changing archives and archivist practices. We propose Blouin and Rosenberg's (2011) *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives*, which is the outcome of a dialogue between Blouin, an archivist, information scientist and historian, and Rosenberg, a historian.

Perhaps the biggest wake-up call for PR history in relation to mediatization is the distinct probability that, outside of those formally studying the discipline, the majority of people get their PR history from audiovisual material akin to Adam Curtis' (2002) *The Century of the Self*. Originally shown on BBC Four television, it had a massive afterlife as a free download on YouTube and is now readily available in a pirate version complete with archival footage of Edward Bernays explaining why he renamed propaganda as public relations. Highly critical and entertaining to watch, this is one future for PR history as radical critics make their PR histories popular with publics. However, prior to moving mediatization up the agenda, we hope that PR historians resource themselves from the rich literature of historiography with a clarified sense of purpose.

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