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## Commentary: A few good men

### Gender balance in the Western Australian public relations industry

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*In a PhD being undertaken through Central Queensland University, Perth public relations professional Greg Smith will examine why communication management and public relations roles are increasingly attracting disproportionate numbers of women (or conversely, why there are so few men). In the work-in-progress commentary piece below, Greg outlines some preliminary research directions. His thesis will examine why industry feminisation has occurred, and assess whether a female-dominated industry will alter the way public relations is perceived, practiced, and taught. Greg is interested in feedback on his research directions, particularly from practitioners, and in hearing from other researchers working in similar areas.*

This preliminary commentary article does not necessarily target academia as its primary readership. As Eaton (2001) points out, much communication scholarship has a limited readership of other scholars and small numbers of students. Instead, this article is primarily aimed at practitioners in the field whose responses I hope to gather to build a picture of current gender issues in the industry. I should also state this article is not a feminist analysis, although it does consider the issue of a largely male-managed industry with an ever-growing female workforce – an interesting combination.

The issue of women in public relations, or the ‘feminisation of public relations’ was first raised in 1989 when, according to Grunig, Toth, and Hon (2001), the *Public Relations Journal* published one of the first articles to note the growing prevalence of female practitioners. They are probably referring to Karlene Lukovitz’s (1989) article ‘Women practitioners, how far, how fast?’ which noted that women had grown from only 27% of the United States

industry in 1970, to 56.6% in 1987. Lukovitz also noted a salaries gap between men and women “as a result of past discrimination and the recent heavy influx of young women into the lower-salaried entry-levels of the profession” and raised concerns that this could flow on to “a decrease in status and salaries for the profession as a whole” (Lukovitz, 1989, p. 14). It is interesting to note that, in the same volume of *Public Relations Journal*, Philip Lesly also published an article suggesting public relations was “losing stature and respect” (1989, p. 40), although he attributed the status loss to increasingly technical practice, rather than to gender reasons.

Lukovitz quoted the then president of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), John Paluszek, as saying he was not aware of any problems relating to women in public relations, and there was no need for industry-wide examination of women’s issues. However, he later acted on the many replies his comments drew, and established a Task Force on Women in PR, which later became the Committee on Work, Life and Gender Issues.

In 2001, Sha defined public relations as feminised, meaning practitioners would more often be female than male. Grunig, Toth, and Hon (2001) wrote one of the main texts on females in public relations. *Women in public relations: How gender influences practice*, deals with issues such as status, salary, equity, gender, gender bias, and sexual discrimination. Primarily, it aims to “make an issue out of sex discrimination in our field” (p. 30). The focus is appropriate for a text written by three women for women, and addresses important issues of imbalance. My thesis research is concerned with uncovering the underlying factors as to why there are increasingly so many women (and, concomitantly, why so few men) in public

relations. The issues Grunig et al. raise certainly have a role to play in some areas of my study, but the book mainly deals with women's existing roles and challenges in public relations, particularly at a time when awareness had not yet been raised to gender imbalance and therefore very little was yet being done to address imbalances and issues that women faced within the industry. As an additional perspective, one could also argue that, with the predominance of women now entering public relations, it is time for discussion and study of male issues, and/or the ways in which gender imbalance may affect both genders. This article is intended as a preliminary starting point for such a discussion in the Australian context.

The PRSA's 2000 world conference, which drew more than 3500 public relations professionals, students, vendors, and trade journalists, addressed the issue. Industry heavyweights Harold Burson and Dan Edelman expressed concern during the conference that the vast majority of people entering the public relations field were women. At the time, Jack O'Dwyer's industry Newsletter had noted that women comprised 70% of Burson-Marsteller's staff. Edelman stumbled over a question about the predominance of women entering public relations before suggesting the industry needed balance (cited in Miller, 2002).

Although approaches differ, scholars do agree that women outnumber men in the public relations industry. De Rosa and Wilcox (1989) questioned the influx of women into public relations. In the only survey of (US) university students' attitudes to public relations, they attempted to discover why women were entering the field in increasing numbers. The research provided an important starting point, but was only quantitative and did not consider professionals, who as key informants may provide rich data from their years of industry observation. Professor Wilcox (head of public relations at San Jose University), no longer has the data, but in e-mail correspondence of 19 April 2005, he provided this summary:

DeAnna DeRosa and I surveyed public relations majors at about six or seven universities with a basic questionnaire. Nothing very sophisticated – just simple

percentages, etc. Since that time, of course, there have been many articles about gender differences in public relations but most of it has been about differences in the workplace (salary, title, years of experience, etc). I can't recall, however, any recent replication of a study that explores the perceptions of current public relations majors (male and female) about gender differences in the public relations field. In many of our classrooms now, it's almost like teaching in a women's college. About 80 percent of our public relations majors are women (personal communication, April 19, 2005).

Similarly, Toth et al. (2001) reported, from their year 2000 gender study (the most recent) of the United States industry, that the profession's current demographic in that country was 70% women and 30% men. They suggested that reflected a steady increase of women entering public relations since the early 1980s. Their previous study, in 1991, showed 61% women and 38% men. These figures appear strikingly similar to the proportion of male/female participation in the Australian public relations industry and at universities, as discussed below. Grunig (2001) also recognised a paradigm shift when she noted that public relations switched from a male to female majority in 1989.

This project will attempt to determine reasons for the growing predominance of women in public relations in Australia and, conversely, the diminishing numbers of men, as reflected in university numbers around Australia and overseas, and in the workplace (both government and private enterprise). It will do this via comprehensive on-line and paper surveys, focus groups, and interviews. After only three months, I would not like to pre-empt what the research might find. However, considering the literature, and following preliminary discussions with some professionals, there are indicators that the following could be possible research hypotheses:

1. Is there a perception that a so-called 'women's persona' is better suited to public relations than men's?;
2. Have historical changes to society (from industrial to information-based) led women into communication careers?;
3. Is public relations seen as an easy entry into a quasi-management career?;
4. Do some traditional male-dominated organisations like to have a woman 'around' at middle-management (non-threatening) level and see the public relations as a way to achieve this?.

In summary, the study's objectives at this stage are:

- To determine the reasons for the growth in women, and decline of men, within public relations.
- To consider the development of public relations and how it has impacted on the profession's gender composition.
- To speculate on future trends with regard to gender and what they may mean for the industry.

### **Rationale**

The project has its origins in my 22-year professional career in the media and in public relations. The high number of women undertaking communication courses at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia also sparked my initial interest, as did growing professional anecdotal evidence of this trend. However, to date I can find no comprehensive academic study explaining the growing drift of women and decline of men in the public relations profession. Some related research has been done by American academics most notably Brenda Wrigley, Elizabeth Toth, Linda Aldoory, Larissa Grunig, Carolyn Cline and Linda Hon. However, only eight major published texts on the subject exist. These mostly concentrate on inequalities regarding salary and responsibility in decision-making. This also was the major

content of the 1984 *Velvet Ghetto* report, which can no longer be obtained in full, only in summary form (Cline, Smith, Johnson, Toth, & Turk, 1986). Journal articles also appear to be relatively rare. Because of this, it appears there is a need for current, original research. It is interesting to note most of the initial research has been done by women. In my opinion this reflects the nature of the industry at the time (the 1980s), when women were striving for greater professional recognition in the industry. By arguing that a male perspective may also offer insights I am not suggesting that the need for recognition of women's issues has ended, only that a range of viewpoints assists with gaining the fullest picture. I wholeheartedly agree with Larissa Grunig, who in a 1998 interview with *Salon* magazine suggested that public relations was not female-dominated, but female-intensive (Brown, 1998). By that I understand her to mean that, while numerically females dominate the industry, they do not dominate it in the sense they control it.

The initial research (gathering of literature) for this project proved challenging because, although statistical evidence is available to show that women outnumber men within public relations, both academically (student enrolments) and professionally, most of the material relating directly to public relations demographics is US-centric. In fact, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) does not keep membership gender statistics. Analytical material is also scarce, largely US-based, and within a particular paradigm. Public relations scholars have mostly approached the subject from feminist perspectives (i.e. pay disparities, gender inequality, discrimination, and management issues), and even these discussions are infrequent.

Other scholars who have delved into the field have made similar comments. Gower (2001) noted that historical studies of women in public relations and analyses of female contributions to the field were rare, while Rea (2002) suggested there had been scant sustained or formal interest in gender equity matters from either professional public relations organisations or industry or academic conferences. Rea (2002) argued that the lack of discussion was not

because gender discrimination did not exist, but because it was not sufficiently recognised and addressed.

Because this study aims to understand why women are entering public relations in ever-increasing numbers, reliance on this scant body of public relations literature and statistics is therefore insufficient. Other works relevant to the study may include reference to the ways in which society has changed and exploring whether there are, potentially, different ways in which women and men approach the 'traditional' public relations functions of creativity, written English, and verbal presentation. For that reason, some sociological and psychological literature will prove valuable. In the wider study, brief comparison will also be made with the highly male-dominated information technology sector in Western Australia.

### Work to date

Gower's (2001) examination of the *Public Relations Journal* for the presence of women from 1945 through 1972 suggests that early signs of interest regarding women's presence and impact in public relations began in the late 1970s. Women had always been working in the profession, but were not always acknowledged. Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1998) point out that Edward L. Bernays, who is widely held responsible for defining the modern function of public relations as 'an advisor to management', had a female business partner. Many historians failed to credit Bernays' wife, Doris E. Fleischman, for her role in their shared accomplishments in public relations. She interviewed clients and wrote news releases, edited the company's newsletter, and wrote and edited books and magazine articles, among other duties.

The growing number of women in public relations was first noted in the mid-1980s and resulted in the benchmark report, *The Velvet Ghetto*. This report, commissioned by the International Association of Business Communicators, concentrated on gender issues, and it touched on the issue of women 'over-populating' the profession. Two years later, the

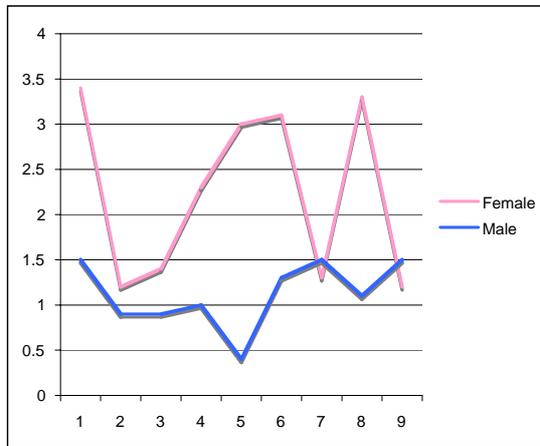
report's authors said that "women working in business communication shows an increase that is wildly out of proportion – 44.56% of the United States workforce is female, but the proportion in business communication is over 70.56%" (Cline et al., 1986, p. 1).

There was also some early statistical evidence presented which showed how women once were by far the minority; the earliest of these being membership of the PRSA from 1949 to 1952. Of the new members admitted in that time, only 3.8% were women (cited in Cline et al., 1986). Gower's (2001) study of *Public Relations Journal* showed that from 1958 to 1961, public relations was still a male-orientated profession. Gower suggests the low numbers of women represented may have reflected the strong patriarchal mythology in 1950s mass media of married woman happily at home with children essentialising the ideal feminine.

Women continued to enter public relations, accounting for 25% of its practitioners by 1960. The United States Census showed an increase in women in public relations and publicity writing of 263.6% from 1950 to 1960. Gower reports that, when public relations student societies started on college campuses in 1968, women were just 34% of membership (2001). By the mid-1980s, however, Cline et al. (1986), could comment that, "A woman's place is no longer in the home. It seems to be in the communication department, and that trend may not be good news for male and female communicators alike" (p. 1).

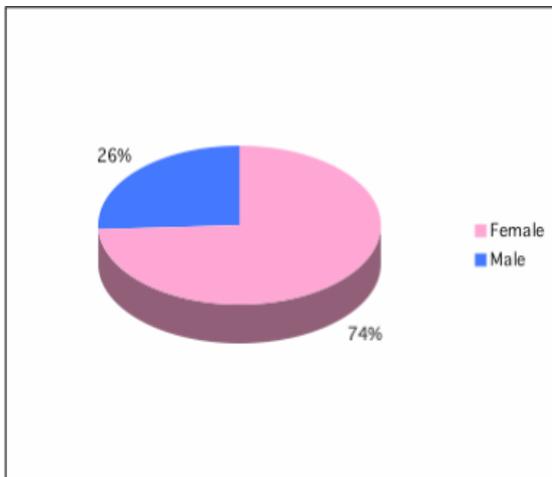
In Australia, women now frequently outnumber men in the workforce as a whole (see **Figure 1**). Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show women's employment participation rates were higher than men's for most of the 1990s. The trend for public relations in Australia is harder to determine, both because of lack of survey data, and because different surveys define public relations differently. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures from the 1996 and 2001 Census data shows employment of "PR Officers" to be 68% female, both nationally and in Perth. My census suggests that women currently represent 75.4% of public relations professionals in Perth (see **Figure 2**).

**Figure 1: Comparison of female and male employment (fulltime and part-time) growth rates from 1995-96 to 2003-2004.**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), April 2005

**Figure 2: Gender of public relations practitioners (private, government, non-profits) in Perth.**



Source: Author's unpublished survey data, 2005.

There are no industry-collected statistics from past years, although from anecdotal evidence the industry has been tilted numerically towards female participation for some years. University enrolment statistics are useful for indicating graduate numbers and future trends. In the Perth universities, for example, female communication enrolments vary from 85% to

74%, with an average of 77.5%. Figures for the past five years' university enrolments show steady participation rates. This may mean these figures will be the 'norm' for industry participation in the foreseeable future.

The statistics I gathered in a phone and e-mail census of the population (defined as the Perth public relations industry) show a remarkable similarity across all sub-groups surveyed: four universities; 120 public relations private practices; 32 Western Australian government agencies' public relations departments; 16 non-profit organisations; and the PRIA's membership.

The United States statistics are almost identically replicated in Australia, with my census of the industry in Perth (total 429 practitioners) showing women comprise 75.4% (319 practitioners) of the public relations industry. Likewise, the balance of females in the other groups was similar:

- 80% in university courses
- 77% of PRIA membership
- 75% in not-for-profits
- 74% in private practice
- 71% in government

However, statistics really do not tell the full story, which is why this study is primarily qualitative. The statistics merely indicate the phenomenon. The challenge will be to gauge people's views, feelings, and outlook for the industry. At the time of writing, qualitative survey data from public relations practitioners had just started to filter through. Second and third-year university students will be surveyed during semester two this year, with interviews and focus groups to be ongoing.

### Implications

One of the central issues Grunig (and others) raise in respect of industry feminisation is what effect women's increased participation has or will have on the industry as a whole:

If women become the majority in public relations, the practice will be typecast as 'women's work'. It will lose what clout it

now has as a management function and become a second-class occupation. In the process, gains made over 50 years to build and sustain the value of public relations will disappear (Bates, 1983, cited in Grunig et al., 2001).

Grunig et al. (2001) quote from a 1993 PRSA monograph, *Ten challenges to public relations during the next decade*, in which Challenge Six addressed the problem of the shrinking number of males in the profession. The challenge suggested much more needed to be done to encourage more men into the field, particularly given that, although their numbers were decreasing overall, men held most senior positions. The challenge suggested this was partly because women had entered the field more recently, but also suggested public relations' growth as a profession would be stymied if it did not reflect population diversity at all levels of hierarchy. Specifically, the challenge recommended steps be taken to identify the factors responsible for declining numbers of males entering the field.

Conversely, many commentators see women's prevalence as potentially enriching. Sha (2001) argued that feminisation would make public relations more ethical, both in appearance and practice. Others, like Larissa Grunig (2001), Dozier (1988), and Rakow (1989) have suggested the prevalence of women would introduce characteristics such as collaboration, sensitivity towards audiences, and better two-way communication. Several theories suggesting reasons why women enter public relations have been put forward. These include the desire to write and attraction to the creative aspects of public relations (Aldoory, 2001). Aldoory argued that only four specialist industry areas (of 11 analysed) were significantly more male than female-oriented, and those specialties entailed areas of expertise that were traditionally male-dominated: technology, finance, sports, and industry. These findings were supported by comments found in previous interviews with public relations practitioners regarding gender segregation in the field (Aldoory, 2001).

Grunig et al. (2001) argue that public relations is an industry founded on feminist

values, such as honesty, justice, and sensitivity, which enhance the symmetrical communication patterns of public relations. Furthermore, the two-way symmetrical model of public relations requires resolving conflict and building relationships, which they indicate are intrinsically 'feminine' values. (Although it is worth noting that other strands of feminist thought would critique this essentialising of gender characteristics as 'inherent'.) In 1995, Hon suggested that feminist theorising about public relations saw the profession as inherently feminine in nature because of its purposes, practices, and attributes.

The issue is also discussed by industry as a concern. Richard Brandt, editor-in-chief of *Upside*, expressed his uneasiness at the possibility that public relations was less respected than other similar professions such as journalism, and therefore easier for women to enter and get ahead (cited in Brown, 1998). Perhaps wanting to protect himself from the avalanche that would follow that statement, Brandt qualified it with the observation that he had seen the profession's status increase, with greater influence and recognition in the last two decades of the twentieth century. He noted that these decades were also the time when many women entered the profession and its gender balance tilted.

What this means for the Australian industry is as yet unclear. Socio-cultural analysis shows Australia to be a particularly masculinised patriarchal culture. Stereotypes have been, and continue to be, passed through the generations. Widespread change became apparent in the 1970s, with the advent of feminism. This led to the entry of more women into the workforce, a phenomenon which is now firmly entrenched. We are now in what is often regarded as the Information Age (Chater & Gaster, 1995). Australia has passed from being an industrial society to a technology society characterised by information exchange. Previously, males dominated the workforce because, according to Chater and Gaster (1995), their contributions were perceived as more valuable than females' contributions.

However, as Chater and Gaster (1995) argue, the changes brought about by the information

age can be seen as favourable to women. They argue that information age workplace needs are dramatically different from industrial era structures, bureaucracies, and rules. The way business is done today is markedly different to previous eras. The most notable impact of change is the increased emphasis on ethical practice. This includes attention to the environment and the proper treatment of staff. The emphasis on these values is seen by some as more compatible with the way women work, potentially presenting an opportunity for women to take the lead in these areas. While the industrial society was created by men for men, the information society needs people, both male and female, who are well educated and technically trained. Chater and Gaster (1995) believe this has created opportunities for women at all levels of business.

Added to this is the way business must now respond rapidly to changing economic conditions. The traditional hierarchical structures, with their inflexible rules and procedures, are not necessarily suited to the new era in which flexibility and creativity are valued. Many of the attributes usually considered necessary to public relations professionals are outlined by Chater and Gaster, who state We are moving from industrialisation, where the patriarchal model worked brilliantly, to an era where our survival and progress will depend on not our ability to set rules, control production lines, establish bureaucracies, assert status and focus on the bottom line, but on our ability to communicate, negotiate work with emotions, create solutions to ever-changing problems and opportunities, respond to change, think globally and strategically and work with and value people . . . The playing field is moving in the direction of feminine values, so what the game now needs are the skills that women can bring to it (1995, p. 10).

In closing, I'd like you to ponder Rush and Grubb-Swetnam's (1996) call to communication students (and this would also apply to

professionals) to become aware of the absences in their lives and profession. They suggested one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is: 'What is missing here? Why is this picture incomplete or distorted?'

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