

→ Conference Report: History of Public Relations



First International History of Public Relations Conference 8 and 9 July 2010, Bournemouth University Reviewed by: [Kate Fitch](#)

Jacque LEtang, the other keynote speaker, called for more contextualised and reflexive approaches to public relations history writing. LEtang maintains there is a need to distinguish between a broad understanding of public relations in all its forms (as, for example, propaganda, promotion, rhetoric, activism, international relations, and public diplomacy) and a narrow definition (where public relations is a US invention exported to the rest of the world). Echoing Russells call to claim the embarrassing moments in public relations history, LEtang argues it is wrong to maintain the simplistic

and unconvincing distinction between propaganda and public relations. Historical writing which pays closer attention to context will help relocate public relations.

Apart from the keynotes, the conference was run in two parallel streams. Inevitably, this meant I missed half the papers. The provision of abstracts and authors biographies on a CD-Rom rather than in the printed program did not aid my decision-making. However, this did mean there was an element of surprise about several presentations, some of which were gems.

Papers from non-US scholars also offered alternative histories. Perhaps most revealing

Presentations by two Australians (my bias is showing) were delightful, well-researched and significant. Peter Sekules reported on the History of Government Relations and Lobbying oral history project commissioned by the National Library of Australia. He believes the recordings with key participants offer a useful insight into the extent to which business groups shaped the government agenda in Australia, and an alternative version of history to industry-generated case studies. Although a work-in-progress, some of the interviews are already available via the National Library of Australia website; these offer a fantastic resource for researchers of Australian public relations history. Jane Johnston has catalogued 124 film and television depictions of public relations dating back to 1933. Her analysis demonstrated surprising shifts in popular representations of public relations practice across a range of genres.

The first day concluded with a panel of journal editors. While the focus was not history of public relations, it was nevertheless relevant as the editors of *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research* echoed Anne Gregory's (*Journal of Communication Management*) comments regarding publishing trends. These trends include double the number of submissions from two years ago, with a greater diversity of views and geographical spread. However, Gregory is concerned with the apparent obsession with 'old' themes such as roles, evaluation, status of public relations, the methodological divide between quantitative and qualitative research and the bifurcation in scholarship between defending or denigrating old paradigms. Gregory maintains these all prevent the innovation and development of public relations scholarship. She also lamented the lack of engagement with significant, real-world social issues.

Eighty delegates attended this inaugural conference, which opened up the space for new kinds of scholarship and new ways of conceptualising public relations history. The keynote addresses and the Meet the Editors sessions are available online (see <http://blogs.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/>). Proceedings will be published after the end of August and a special issue of *Journal of Communication Management* will contain selected papers in 2011.

Author biography

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