
The boys are back in town: Rethinking the feminisation of public relations through the prism of social media

Liz Bridgen

De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

Abstract

This article examines, via a survey of public relations practitioners working below senior management level, whether technician-type roles, far from being a ‘velvet ghetto’, are now providing a place in which a practitioner’s status can be validated and social capital built and whether this shift is having an influence on the debates surrounding the feminisation of the profession. The study discovered that the technician role is becoming increasingly polarised and those who carry out mechanical-type social media roles (such as running an organisational Twitter feed or being an organisation’s spokesperson in online forums) have less opportunity to build social capital online than those who are able to ‘be themselves’ in social media interactions.

Introduction

Public relations practitioners have used computer-mediated communications in their broadest sense for the past two decades at least. Many of the functions of public relations practice which were seen as new in the 1990s and early 2000s – such as sending email, contributing to electronic mailing lists, maintaining intranets and taking part in chat room discussions – are now a familiar part of the range of tasks undertaken as part of the ‘technician’ role within public relations.

We should bear in mind, however, that the division of public relations roles into a simple technician/leadership dichotomy discussed by many writers (e.g. Dozier, 1992) is contentious and does not take into account the variety and skill level of the wide range of public relations functions. Van Ruler (2005) attempted to reconceptualise the technician role, taking the

concept beyond a simplistic technician/management divide, to one which included a range of tasks including facilitating conversations and creating conversation spaces for a range of publics. In part, Van Ruler’s definition foresaw the developments in public relations practice made possible by technology. This contribution thus moved the technician role on from that visualised by Dozier (1992) and DeSanto and Moss (2004) to one which involved practitioners having a high level of technical competence and saw even the most junior staff communicating directly with an organisation’s publics. However, regardless of the decade in which roles are being described, the technologies involved, and the skill levels required, ‘technician’ roles tend to involve client liaison, negotiation, writing and creative work, with their occupant most likely to be female (CIPR, 2011) and not involved in public relations planning and policy formation (Dozier, 1992).

The introduction above provides the reference points for the focus of this article which examines, via a survey of public relations practitioners working below senior management level, whether technician-type roles, far from being a ‘velvet ghetto,’ are now providing a place in which a practitioner’s status can be validated, social capital built, and whether this shift is having an influence on the debates surrounding the feminisation of the profession. This article posits that such a shift is potentially the result of practitioners being able to form and possess, via social media, a status made possible by having the ‘sponsorship’ of a place of work and thus deriving personal authority and authenticity from this association.

There are a number of ways which social media can be used by those in a relatively

junior position, including running organisational Twitter feeds (which sometimes amounts to no more than a customer-service role) to direct liaison with key journalists and bloggers via social media and the creation of conversation spaces. It can also be used for research and environmental scanning – indeed, Dozier (1986) believed that involvement in environmental scanning helped practitioners gain power for themselves and their department since both scientific and informal scanning positively correlated with management status roles. Thus, the knowledge that resulted from effective environmental scanning gave a practitioner power which could be used to leverage influence in the workplace.

Despite the seemingly open nature of the internet, men appear to be more active (or visible) in social media spaces than women, even though both genders are both clearly using online spaces. For instance, two thirds of bloggers are men (Technorati, 2011) and while women outnumber men on Twitter (45% of Twitter users are men and 55% are women, Solis, 2010) the figures are reversed when considering the most ‘influential’ users (ibid).

This and similar data may have implications within the workplace insofar as type of roles which may be given to those tasked with communicating to an online audience. Thus, this article explores whether certain social media tasks are becoming ‘gendered’ with higher status being attached to certain online roles – in particular those which involve communicating with elite persons. Such roles give the practitioner more expert power and thus help build social capital.

It is through this prism that this article explores whether there is the empirical evidence for changes in emphasis within technician-type roles. It argues that as the technician role changes due to the access it provides to elite persons via social networks such as Twitter, aspects of the role may cease to be viewed as ‘feminine’ and be seen as a route to management positions. This in turn may affect how we view the feminisation of the profession and may lead to a reconceptualisation of arguments around the ‘velvet ghetto’.

The corollary of this is that aspects of the technician role may become increasingly feminised (or velvet ghetto-ised) as junior public relations roles involving social media are split between those who process information on behalf of clients (e.g. running Facebook pages or Twitter feeds) and those who communicate with others in their own right, using and raising their social capital in the process.

Consequently, two hypotheses are tested in this article to attempt to shine some light on this area:

1. That men working in public relations at the technical level are more active on social media networks than women.
2. Men are using social networks to increase their social capital.

Via these hypotheses, we can explore whether the technician role is now becoming increasingly attractive as a route into public relations due to the access to management positions it offers via online networking opportunities.

However, Kent (2010) has observed a fascinating paradox which should be noted when discussing the importance placed on social media by public relations practitioners. He argues that the focus on social media by many public relations practitioners could damage the reputation of public relations, arguing that “our value will diminish if we allow ourselves to become mere technical experts ... using social media for ‘reaching publics’ is not the same as ‘developing and maintaining the visibility of corporate narratives’ [or] ‘strengthening organisation-public relationships through identification and persuasion’” (p. 652) Thus, if we follow Kent’s logic, the focus on technological solutions within public relations could damage the profession more than ‘feminisation’ ever did.

This article will consider whether debates around the feminisation of the profession and the technician role need to be retheorised – and whether public relations roles which do not encompass social media will become increasingly marginalised from management or, as Kent suggests, instead be seen as a more strategic and managerial form of public relations.

This article is rooted in feminist theory, a widely debated term but which, for the purpose of this study, serves as a “framework for gender research in communication” (Wrigley, 2010, p. 247). It is necessary to understand this article’s standpoint since, while “some communications research has studied women on their own terms, without judging them against a male norm [...] most public relations research still reflects a male viewpoint” (Aldoory, 1996, p. 13). As yet, postmodern feminist theory (particularly from an organisational studies perspective) is little explored in public relations writing, with the focus still being on women’s lack of progression in public relations environments, rather than exploring areas such as the structure and bureaucracy that creates such environments (e.g. Ashcraft, 2001).

It should be noted that postmodernist organisational theory acknowledges that “gender is not about women any more” (Calas & Smircich, 1999, p. 660) but can also encompass queer studies, masculinity, ethnicity and class. Thus, many comments in this article may relate or have resonance with other groups wishing to move into a management role within a public relations environment.

The article is organised as follows. Following a brief review of the current debates surrounding social media use in public relations, it looks at the debates around the feminisation of public relations, attempting to provide a critical framework around which the hypotheses can be discussed. The article then draws on primary research to address whether aspects of the technician role are becoming ‘de-feminised’ and thus are more attractive to career-minded men and women.

Public relations and social media

From the middle of the last decade, public relations practice has seen a rise in the uses of social networks for communication with clients, publics, journalists, suppliers and colleagues. These social networks are “characterized by the potential for real time interaction, reduced anonymity ... a sense of propinquity ... short response times and the ability to time shift” (Kent, 2010, p. 645) and have, according to many writers on professional practice, changed

the way that public relations is practised (e.g. Phillips & Young, 2009). While the basic purpose of the public relations technician’s role has not changed, the performance of this role, and the skills required, have changed considerably.

One aspect of this change is that public relations practice has started to become, by necessity, more transparent (or, as Page, 2012, would argue, ‘synthetically’ transparent since the transparency is little more than a performance). Nonetheless, this transparency is seen by the public relations industry as a necessity if the credibility and authenticity of public relations is to be maintained, with practitioners having to be seen to be ‘themselves’ and be clear about the basis of their authority.

This authority is usually vested in a corporate body (the agency’s client or the practitioner’s employer). The public relations practitioner uses this both to enhance their own status and benefit the organisation by providing a personal and ‘authentic’ mouthpiece for the organisation by using their own name and background to vouch for it (itself problematic due to an individual’s identity becoming part of an organisation’s capital). As Searls and Weinberger (2001, in Kelleher, 2007) observed: “Since corporations and businesses aren’t individuals, ultimately their authenticity is rooted in their employees [...] When a conversation is required, or even just desired, being able to count upon a rich range of corporate spokespeople is crucial” (p. 98). Thus, a modern organisation will be able to call on a variety of different people to represent it, with, for instance the ‘official’ media spokesperson and the people staffing the Twitter feed and the Pinterest board being from different parts of the communication spectrum.

Over the past half decade, practitioners have started to come out of the shadows and become ‘stars’ in their own right, albeit often within the small world of media (formerly they would have only been a name on the end of a press release or a contact in a journalist’s contacts book and thus never seen by the ‘public’). To an extent this has always happened, with agency bosses such as Mark Borkowski and

Lynne Franks featured in national newspapers as industry spokespeople. However, social media has given younger and novice practitioners a chance to create social capital among their peers, the wider media industry and possibly the sector in which they work (e.g. technology or healthcare). And, as this article will explore, this is leading to (or reaffirming) a gender divide in public relations role with men happily embracing the ‘good communicator’/technician previously occupied by female practitioners but only because of the opportunities that aspects of it offer to develop social capital.

Diga and Kelleher (2009) argue that since technicians are likely to spend more time writing and reading materials than managers “so it may follow that technicians may be the ones handling the social media” (p. 441). This claim is uncontroversial but they counter it by adding that “since the Web provides many opportunities for issues management, relationship management, and environmental scanning, and these functions are more often associated with manager roles, managers may spend more time using social network sites and tools than technicians” (ibid). Thus, social media use should not just be seen as a technician’s role but something that anyone in the communications team may be involved with and where there may not be a clear line between ‘technician’ and ‘management’ responsibilities.

Diga and Kelleher (2009) posit that practitioners at all levels who use social network sites and tools more frequently have higher perceived structural power. The point that junior practitioners can achieve this power is crucial to this debate and this article considers whether the power that social media can afford to even relatively junior practitioners is making the technician role more attractive and thus changing the nature of the debate around the feminisation of the profession.

Public relations and gender

Public relations research in the field of gender studies spans a wide range of perspectives with writers such as Fitch and Third (2010), Fröhlich

(2004) and Mitrook, Wilkes and Cameron (1998) arguing that the feminisation of the public relations industry has privileged masculinity and steered women into non-managerial roles.

Women make up the majority of public relations practitioners, with one study suggesting that as many as 63% of UK public relations practitioners are women (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2011) – however, far fewer women occupy senior positions. While the question of why (or whether) women eschew senior positions has been debated for at least three decades, there is little agreement as to why this should be the case and, as may be expected with a newer subject area (such as public relations research and its exploration of gender issues) research has shifted from “explanatory research on sex differences in public relations and on the factors contributing to discrimination against women” to “understanding the processes lying behind the observed phenomena” (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007, p. 230). These points will be in debated in more depth later in this section.

While there is general agreement among public relations academics that the public relations industry has been feminised, its meaning for the industry is the subject of considerable debate. Writers see the feminisation of the industry, broadly, as either an opportunity for more responsible and effective practice (Rakow, 1989) or a barrier to female advancement (e.g. Lesly, 1988, Mitrook, et al., 1998, Fröhlich, 2004, and Fröhlich & Peters 2007).

The feminisation of an industry – “the process by which an occupation, institution or discourse becomes marked and thereby changed by the increasing presence of women” (Carter & Steiner, 2004, p. 347) – can be demonstrated where women form the majority of workers, thus causing salaries and status to decrease. It is this particular process which is central to this research article. Although the literature discussed in this project acknowledges that the profession has been feminised, this research aims to establish whether we need to reappraise what we mean by feminisation if the technician role is

becoming popular among male practitioners. This should be seen as part of a wider body of research into gender issues in public relations which attempts to establish “the effects and consequences of the feminisation of public relations while trying to identify and label the roles and functions women perform” (Krider & Ross, 1997, p. 440).

While Mackey (2003) suggests that the feminisation of the profession implies that women may be particularly suited to carry out public relations work, and Rea (2002) seeing the feminisation of the profession as being broadly positive for women, others (e.g. Fröhlich, 2004, and Mitrook et al., 1998) suggest that senior positions carry a largely masculine ideology with the ‘technician’ roles in public relations (which encompass client liaison, negotiation, writing and creative work) increasingly feminised and thus marginalising their occupants from career progression. Fröhlich and Peters (2007) subsequently took this argument a step further by observing that women’s communication skills (seen as central to the technician role) have been devalued as a trivial ‘small talk tool’. This means, they claim, “that exceptional female communication skills are not only being devalued, but are even being recoded as a sign of a lack of professional (public relations) skills in general” (p. 242).

Dozier and Broom’s (2006) suggestion that the creation of the ‘technician’ role has less to do with the feminisation of the profession and more to do with the conflict between ‘management’ and ‘creatives’ is debateable, with writers such as Fröhlich (2004), and Mitrook, et al., (1998) arguing that the feminisation of the industry, and the feminine values deemed to be enshrined in ‘excellent public relations’, forces women into non-management roles.

The starting point for this and similar arguments – most recently made by writers such as Fröhlich (2004), Fröhlich and Peters (2007), and Fitch and Third (2010) – is that the public relations role has become increasingly feminised. This, it is claimed, reduces their status and marginalises their occupants from career progression. Furthermore, it manages to obscure discrimination since the majority of

occupants of the public relations role are female. A ‘common sense’ practitioner argument is that discrimination now rarely occurs and where it does it is because the old (male) guard are still in place, soon to be swept out of the way by a wave of bright, ambitious women. However, Aldoory and Toth (2002) explored and debunked this largely human capitalist view of the situation, explaining that those who support this view: “believe that women have not had enough managerial experience as yet because they are too new to the field to have gained it. This theory suggests that “capital” is available to everyone [...]. However, this model is problematic if these investment opportunities are not equally available to men and women” (p. 107).

The reasons for women’s lack of advancement in public relations are complex and beyond the scope of this article. However, it is worth highlighting a couple of further hypotheses regarding women’s lack of progress to senior management positions (if promotion to management is seen as desirable, a perspective which is contested – e.g. Wrigley, 2002, Creedon, 1991).

Van Vianen and Fischer (2002) observe that women still cite work-home conflict as the biggest barrier to overcome when accepting a senior management position, with the authors pointing to broader societal issues having a larger part to play in career success than the efforts of a particular industry to promote inclusivity. Indeed, while the industry pays lip-service to the need to ‘do something’, with a contributor to the Hanson Research *Getting the balance right* study (2012) claiming that the “communications industry is losing excellent talent before it needs to due to burnout and lack of work-life balance”, this and other industry reports puts the blame (and the need to solve the problem) firmly at the door of the employer rather than society itself. Although the Hanson Research study claimed 80% of employers recognised the need to address flexibility, the rise in the use of social media technologies for work means that ‘flexible working’ is often something of an illusion for the practitioners who feel compelled to work out of office hours for a complex web of reasons (Bridgen, 2011).

While the need for flexible working should not affect younger women working in public relations, the ‘surge’ of women towards public relations agencies noted by Fröhlich and Peters (2007) may be based on the perception that the portfolio-style work may be easier for those with family commitments to manage. It may “in some way also offer better opportunities for employed mothers to manage the “balancing act” than other types of organizations” (p. 244).

Ashcraft (2001) notes that “[t]he bureaucratic canons of rationality and hierarchy privilege ‘professionals’ (i.e., strategic, objective, managerial work/ers who suppress private needs) and exclude or devalue work/ers aligned with emotionality, sexuality, and other ‘irrational’ matters” (p. 1302). Thus, positions requiring communications or empathy or other ‘soft’ skills are devalued (it is easy to draw parallels with nursing, counselling and teaching at this point) and are considered inferior to managerial or technical positions. Thus, although Ashcraft and Fröhlich and Peters arrive at their conclusions from different perspectives, the writers agree that work cannot be separated from personal life.

Many writers, especially from the radical feminist school, suggest that bureaucratic and societal structures need to change for there to be equality in the workplace and elsewhere. They argue that this is almost impossible, as it would mean dismantling informal male networks and values, which now reproduced as much online as they are offline.

Thus, this article examines whether informal online networks are in reality amplifying informal offline male networks and values and providing a place where inequalities are reproduced rather than diminished, rather than providing a neutral place where women can compete on equal terms with men. Thus, the flexibility offered by online work in terms of working hours, and the opportunity to be judged for professional skills rather than personal attributes, are simply an illusion.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study and in order to establish the situation regarding the type of work carried out at technician level in public

relations, how social media is used, and how technicians view their personal profile, a quantitative approach was taken.

The main tool was a self-completion survey which aimed to explore the hypotheses and establish whether gender played a role in career-building social media activity (although the author acknowledges that the nature of social media work in public relations means that online profiles can potentially be built accidentally simply by doing a job well while in the public eye).

The sample selection required specialist knowledge of the UK public relations industry and where to locate practitioners. Consequently, a purposive sampling approach was taken in order to draw on the author’s knowledge as a former public relations practitioner and current public relations academic and “identify participants who are likely to provide data that are detailed and relevant to the research findings” (Oliver, 2006, p. 245). An electronic survey was distributed among a variety of practitioner networks in the following ways:

- Link to the survey sent to members of the PRCA’s Frontline group for new and young practitioners (n=150).
- Mentioned on Twitter by the researcher to her followers (n=769) four times over a two-month period. It was re-tweeted by seven Twitter users.
- Links to the survey posted on the Chartered Institute of Public Relations’ Facebook page and the PR Daily Facebook page.

All responses should be considered against the backdrop that these were self-completion surveys and their findings should be considered with caution due to the temptation of practitioners (or indeed, any survey respondent) to over-estimate their capabilities, give what they see are the ‘right’ answers or answer questions without consideration (see Cheney & Christiansen, 2001).

The survey’s categories in terms of work carried out were broadly based on Sha’s (2010) research on work categories, thus maintaining some continuity with past studies but appended to take account of the changes that social media has brought to professional practice since the original research was carried out.

A total of 41 questionnaires were completed over a two-month period (June to August 2012), with the largest group (n=8) being account managers. Survey response in terms of gender mirrored those reported by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (2011) with 65% (n=22) of survey responses being female compared with the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' figure of 63%. However, it should be noted that the practitioners completing this survey were all at a sub-senior management level; it should be borne in mind that the Chartered Institute of Public Relations noted that "women are more likely to hold positions of responsibility lower down within their organisations." (2011, p. 9) which means that women were potentially over-represented in the sample. Furthermore, the sample size was relatively small which means that findings can only suggest possible trends and avenues for further research and not categorically state whether actual change has taken place.

Findings and discussion

The research set out to explore two hypotheses – whether men working in public relations at the technical level are more active on social media networks than women and whether men are using social networks to increase their social capital.

Quantitative research was necessary since a survey of industry literature was not conclusive in demonstrating whether men were now moving into junior public relations roles in greater numbers—although the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' annual State of the Profession survey (2009, 2010, 2011) suggests a trend towards this—but the hypotheses tested provided some interesting results regarding how social networks are used. The hypotheses are explored via a series of themes relating to gender roles in the workplace, social media use, and social capital.

Gendered roles

The questionnaire from which the findings below were drawn named 17 work categories (fig 1) based on Sha's (2010) original list of 13. While no task was solely carried out by men or women, women were more likely to carry out a

greater number of tasks regardless of their level and were still involved in junior-level tasks (administration and basic communication) as they progressed in their career. Meanwhile, men appeared to leave basic tasks behind as they progressed (if they ever did them at all). Among those occupying senior technician roles (above account manager level) no man claimed to be involved in administration, media relations, blogger relations or event management, whereas a third of senior-level women did. This would suggest that the time of senior-level male technicians may be apportioned in other ways. While it may be the case that men simply spend more time on senior level tasks, it is also likely that men have time free to spend on other tasks – such as building social capital via social networks or experimenting with social media channels and thus building expert knowledge.

However, these suggestions should be seen against a general context of the public relations work carried out by men and women. There were few major differences between the sexes when it came to actual work carried out. Women appeared to be more likely to be involved in administration than men (81% (n=22) to 71% (n=10)) but were also slightly more likely to be involved in the more 'managerial' tasks such as strategic planning (97% (n=26): to 93% (n=13)). Interestingly, women were considerably more likely than men to run an organisational Twitter feed (85% (n=22) to 57% (n=8)) and more likely to be involved in blogger liaison (78% (n=21) to 71% (n=10)). In this context, it is clear that women are not avoiding (or being pushed away from) social media tasks in the workplace but are potentially being routed towards the 'mechanical' social media tools where timely, accurate and on-message communication is valued more than strategic thinking, creativity, campaign development or networking with elite others.

Meanwhile, social media monitoring – which could fall into an administrative role or be seen as part of a strategic environmental scanning function – is carried out by 71% (n=10) of men and 74% (n=20) of women, showing no significant gender difference.

Fig 1: Work categories

Junior/technical roles	Administration
	Blogger liaison
	Client liaison
	Event management
	Media relations
	Running an organisational Twitter feed
	Running or contributing to your agency's own Twitter feed
	Administrating organisational social media pages (e.g, Facebook, Google+, YouTube, Pinterest, etc.)
	Social media monitoring
	Supplier liaison
Senior roles	Crisis Management
	Internal Relations
	Issues Management
	New business development
	Project/Client Management
	PR Programme
	Planning Strategic Planning

Of course, this self-reporting is open to a degree of bias, but nonetheless demonstrates how practitioners see themselves via the prism of social media – or how they would like to be seen.

Social media use across the genders: domestic vs. professional settings

A mixed picture occurs regarding general social media use that transcends the boundary between domestic and professional settings or usage. However, it should be remembered that the boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘home’ are blurred or even indistinct, with much work activity taking place both in domestic and social settings and at once for both business and recreational use (Bridgen, 2011, Gregg 2011).

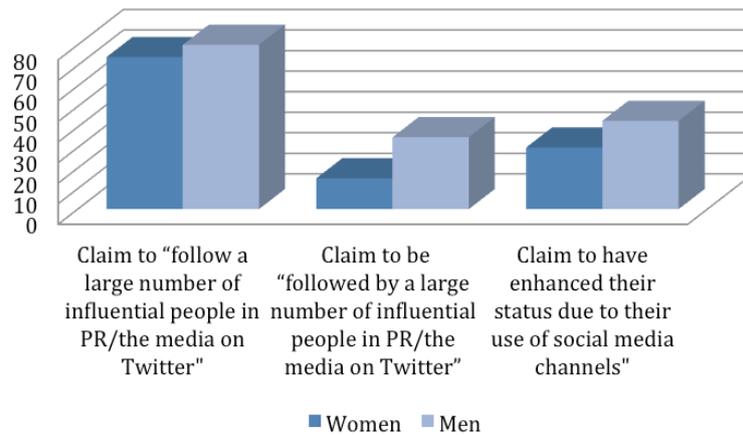
Men and women were equally likely (78% for both groups) to use Twitter for personal use, but men were marginally more likely to write a public relations-focused blog (43% (n=6) of men compared with 33% (n=9) of women). Men were also slightly more likely to use YouTube for personal use (64% (n=9) compared with 63% (n=9) of women and considerably more likely to use influence tools such as Klout (50% (n=7) of men compared with 26% (n=9) of women). Such discrepancies

could be explained by the gender divide in workplace tasks, as outlined above.

Many of the social media uses mentioned above could be aligned with the ‘technician role’ and while these categories have been re-imagined by Van Ruler (2005), the daily maintenance of social media tools is largely seen as a sub-management function or has been taken into a specialist social media team. Thus, while 28% (n=4) of men ‘never or hardly ever’ run an organisational Twitter feed, and 36% (n=5) claim ‘never or hardly ever’ to contribute to an organisational Twitter feed, they are clearly using Twitter in the workplace and at home for other, potentially social capital-enhancing, means.

For instance, although a similar ratio (74% (n=20)) of women to (80% (n=8)) of men claim to “follow a large number of influential people in PR/the media on Twitter” the figures alter dramatically when engagement (online contact) with others online is considered (what we might call a ‘two-way’ or conversational approach to social media). Only 15% (n=4) of women claim to be “followed by a large number of influential people in PR/the media on Twitter” compared with 35% of men (n=5). Similarly, only 30% (n=8) of women claim to have enhanced their status due to the use of social media channels compared with 43% (n=6) of men (see figure 2).

Fig 2. Gendered status on social media

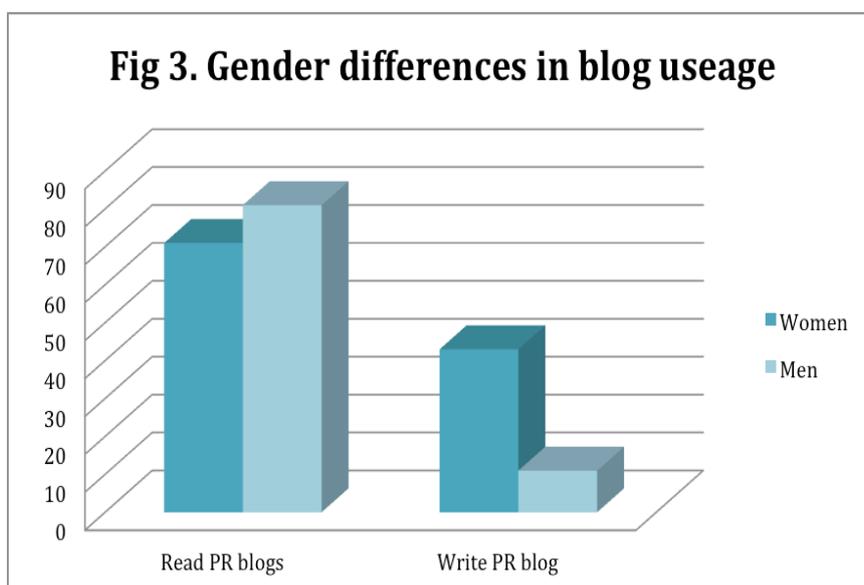


Men were also more likely to claim to experiment with social media (64% (n=9) of men compared with 59% (n=16) of women) and used a wider range of social media tools in the workplace and in their personal life. This suggests that men are slightly more active at creating 'relationships' (a contested term) online than women – an activity which takes time and effort to do well (Phillips & Young, 2009).

It appears that, far from being the conversation creators, women may take a back seat when it comes to engagement with others in social media. For instance, women are more likely to read public relations-related blogs than men but less likely to comment on these blogs

and engage in any discursive activity (see figure 3). Women's social media interaction seems to be both domestic and one-way – for instance applying for jobs via social media, an activity in which they are more active than men. Thus it appears that men are demonstrating a significant amount of what the public relations industry may term as 'engagement' with others in social media and I would argue that this is because they have the opportunity to do so, rather than because women do not want to do it. It is interesting to note here that the 'conversation' element of social media seems to be carried out more successfully by men, thus contradicting the 'women as communicator' position.

Fig 3. Gender differences in blog usage



Therefore, it appears from this research that the tasks which involve constant monitoring and updating of online material (such as maintaining a Twitter feed) have become the 'female' or technician jobs in public relations whereas the roles which involved creating new conversation spaces or require creative thinking or the power to implement new campaigns are becoming more male dominated.

Social media activity and social capital

The survey results revealed little significant difference in terms of general social media activity between men and women but there was an indication (hypothesis 2) that men were more likely to use them for creation of social capital and thus career enhancement. Despite 86% (n=12) of male responders and 88% (n=24) of women claiming to use social networks to enhance their online profile and/or develop their career (Q7), an analysis of how each gender used social media to develop social capital showed that men invested more time and energy in this area as will be explored below.

At the root of these differences in social capital creation via social media is the unavoidable fact that women are not as active as men in using social media to pursue their careers, but instead are using it to carry out their jobs. Van Vianen and Fischer (2002) note that "women's absence in top management could be partly due to the fact that women show less ambition to pursue a top management position compared with men at the same levels" (p. 325). However we have to consider whether the relative lack of interest in building social capital via social media is due to, as mentioned above, a focus on 'getting the job done' or simply because women use other tools (for instance telephone, email, or face-to-face. for networking and advancement).

Van Vianen and Fischer (2002) observed that the most "frequently mentioned female concerns are workload and work-home conflicts. These concerns are especially elicited when confronted with cultures where high effort, achievement, and competition are the rule" (p. 319). Thus, as mentioned above, women may simply not have the time to network or seek to build their personal brand or

be opting out of the masculine working culture and building their career in other ways.

Conclusion

Van Vianen and Fischer (2002) suggested that the female middle managers' ambition to pursue a career into higher management was weaker than that of their male counterparts – however, the women who did want to progress were likely to be as active as their male counterparts and engage in broadly similar (masculine) behaviour - in a sense, 'playing by the rules'. Thus, among this sample there will be women who are using social media tools as actively as men to pursue their career and similarly are eschewing the mechanical social media roles.

However, we need to be cautious if aligning progression with success in public relations; As Wrigley (2002) notes, we need to consider how practitioners – especially women - perceive senior roles and job satisfaction and what constitutes job satisfaction for them. Thus, while men (and women) may be seeking progression and using social media to help them achieve this, others may be using social media to make their working lives more enjoyable and fulfilling. This may be through using social media to help them manage their workload, possibly due the flexibility it offers (although Gregg (2011) observes that this flexibility and thus the encroachment of work into personal life produces multiple home/work conflicts) or because it allows them to follow their personal interests online during the working day.

The research suggests that while men and women are equally active in social media in both the workplace and in their personal life, men are more likely than women to use social media for the type of activities which build social capital and can further their career; they were also more likely to use social media as an interactive tool outside the workplace. Thus, men are using social media differently from women, potentially by being prepared to have conversations online with industry experts who they do not 'know' in person (e.g. bloggers and senior public relations figures on Twitter) and ultimately spending more time using social media channels. However, it is important to reaffirm the point made above that this divide

in usage may have more to do with the opportunities presented to carry out these roles rather than any gender-bound personal choice.

These findings have a fascinating implication for the position mooted by Fröhlich and Peters (2007, p. 233) – namely that good conversation skills could be seen as a ‘career killer’. We may now have to address whether it is not the good conversation skills per se which are the career killer but the context in which these conversations are carried out. While a practitioner may run a Twitter feed or respond to Facebook posts on behalf of a client or employer, their communication or conversation skills are moderated by another organisation, allowing them only to communicate mechanically and not follow their own interests and create networks in their own right. This ability to follow conversation rules and have the talent to be given responsibility for an organisation’s online presence could end up forcing women into a job which has little opportunity for social capital creation.

Meanwhile, those who are able to carry out blogger relations and are able to ‘be themselves’ in conversation spaces can use these interactions to create social capital and, furthermore, develop their expertise in this area – an opportunity denied to those stuck in the ‘Twitter Ghetto’. Thus, those who are successful in unmoderated online interactions (and become a good conversationalist and network builder online) find themselves in a virtuous circle where having a strong online presence helps them to develop it further. Meanwhile, those who are in the backroom using their communication skills on a client’s behalf are fulfilling what Fröhlich and Peters (2007) describe as the “‘new’ gender stereotype in public relations” (p. 233) and their role as “natural born communicators” (p. 233), rather than helping their career to bloom is actually stifling it.

It could be argued that this turn towards a polarisation in junior public relations roles, where communication roles online either see the practitioner writing as themselves or as a client’s spokesperson, could lead to a situation where previous assumptions relating to gendering or junior roles does not always apply

and may have the power to affect how we debate the feminisation of the profession.

To be able to fully understand whether there has been a gender shift in public relations roles at technician level, and whether the technician role is becoming more attractive to men, would involve a longitudinal study of public relations practitioners genders, progression and job roles. However, as mentioned above, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations State of the Profession report (2011) (and the earlier Business of Diversity report (2006)) has shown a slight downward annual shift in the number of women working in public relations of from 66% (2005), 65% (2009 and 2010) to 63% (2011).

Thus, it appears that although men are occupying public relations roles in slightly greater numbers each year and potentially using the status it infers to develop their online profile, my research shows that they are not embracing all aspects of the technician role. It appears that the ‘mechanical’ tasks (which appear to offer little opportunity for promotion or visibility) are being occupied by women to a similar or increasing degree and offline, men are not involved in what may be seen as the least management-orientated tasks such as event management and media relations, or leave them behind at an earlier stage than women.

This research suggests is that social media is offering opportunities for women as much as men – but that two factors are preventing women from taking advantage of the opportunities:

1. Women are taking the social media role into their lives on top of their other public relations responsibilities whereas men are somehow making room for it by dropping certain roles. This suggests that men may use aspects of social media more effectively for building social capital simply because they have more time for it. Thus, it may not be seen by the users as a feminine or low-level ‘technician’ work, but something desirable which is needed to obtain the greater rewards of higher status among peers.

2. Women are being ghettoised into mechanistic social media roles, where the ability to work with key messages and be the

spokesperson for a company transcends any need for the personal to enter business life – and thus prevents the practitioner from building social capital.

Thus, it appears that while the answer to the first hypothesis, which set out to explore whether men working in public relations at the technical level are more active on social media networks than women, was initially inconclusive, a further interrogation of the data revealed a difference in how men and women used social networks - and it was this use which proved the second hypothesis. It appears that men are using social networks to increase their social capital and furthermore are either putting themselves, or being put into positions, where they can exploit this area to their long-term advantage.

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Author contact details:

Liz Bridgen, Leicester Media School, De Montfort University, Leicester, United Kingdom

Email: ebridgen@dmu.ac.uk

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