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An exploration of *PR Week* UK's framing of specialist PR identities (1985–2010)

Nicky Garsten *, Bruce Cronin, Jane Howard

University of Greenwich, London, UK

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ABSTRACT

A trend of increased specialisation in public relations has been widely asserted but little substantiated. Specifically, there is no longitudinal study of the development of specialist coverage in the principal trade journal of the industry, *PR Week*. Neither has there been an exploration of the perspectives of *PR Week* UK's senior managers on specialist-practitioner identities. This article seeks to fill these gaps.

This examination of specialist coverage in *PR Week* 1985–2010 finds a punctuated process of constructing specialist practitioner identities within an institutional subsystem. We examine over 220 editions of *PR Week*, in the UK, over a 26-year period. We calculate that there was indeed a statistically significant trend of published regular specialist pages.

We analysed editorial announcements about regular specialist pages and interviewed three former senior managers from *PR Week*. We considered page titles as both content and discourse. We also adapted Bucher et al.'s (2016) framing strategies. In doing so, we revised one of Bucher et al.'s strategies, re-terming the 'self-casting' strategy as a *media casting* strategy in the context of a trade publication's framing of a profession's boundaries.

Building on the scholarship of Edwards and Pieczka (2013), we suggest that the trade media play an institutional role in boundary setting. A trade publication's role in the promotion of jurisdictions was, and has not been, previously ascribed by Abbott (1988) or Waisbord (2019). We newly find that when *PR Week* introduced specialist pages, the publication's executive *actively* sought to bring sector-specialist practitioners, with waning identification with the profession, back into the PR fold. Like a sheepdog, *PR Week* played a *proactive* institutional role in the professional reframing of public relations around specialisms. Yet the boundaries that *PR Week* defended were fuzzy given that over 95% of the regular specialist pages titles did not include the name 'PR'. We also argue, that in establishing the specialist pages *PR Week* executives not only championed PR's legitimacy, but also sought to protect the magazine's market and to enhance the title's journalistic brand.

1. Introduction

"Everyone was a specialist, because that sounded better", recalls former *PR Week* Editor from the early 1990s, Steve Farish. Whilst the trend of specialization in the occupational field of public relations is often asserted (as specified below) this claim has not been systematically substantiated. Also, little is known about specialists' changing senses of self-identities. These gaps need addressing because historical accounts of public relations have significance in 'terms of sociological interpretations of the occupation, practitioners and their own self-understanding' (Fitch & L'Etang, 2017: 117).

We focus on these issues in an examination of the changing content of *PR Week* from 1985–2010. We ask if there was significant growth of specialization in the pages of *PR Week* during the period. We consider *PR Week* as an institutional subsystem (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013) and interrogate its interrelationship with specialization in the industry. What was the role of *PR Week*'s senior management in shaping professional specialist identities in the industry? In this regard, how was specialization related to public relations professional identities? How fluid are these identities? To what extent does specialist coverage relate to journalistic and commercial concerns?

1.1. Specialization, its istorical importance, and rends

Public Relations specializations have been variously classified as detailed in Appendix 1. These include:

* Correspondence to: QA349, Queen Anne Building, University of Greenwich, Royal Naval College, Greenwich, London, SE10 9RS, UK.
E-mail address: n.garsten@gre.ac.uk (N. Garsten).

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A) Industry sector areas like healthcare public relations or tech public relations (CIPR, 2019; Morley, 2002; PRCA, 2020);
B) Roles/disciplines of practice that are relevant to a variety of industry sectors, like public affairs or media relations (CIPR, 2019; Morley, 2002; PRCA, 2020);
C) Locations of operation (PRCA, 2020); and
D) Technical/craft/service areas like web design or media monitoring (Morley, 2002; PRCA, 2020).

Former Edelman public relations consultant and author, Michael Morley (2002: 55), highlights public relations specialization as a 'potent force' within the public relations industry. He considers specialization to have had a greater 'impact' on the practice of international public relations from 1970–2000 than globalization or communications technology. Different specialist areas are engrained in public relations' scholarship and interest groups. They are subjects of university syllabi (CIPR, 2019), textbooks (e.g., Theaker, 2004 and, 2020), and specialist publications (e.g., Bowman, 1989; Garsten & Bruce, 2018). They are also long-standing foci of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' (CIPR's) and the Public Relations Communication Association's (PRCA's) sector groups.

Yet, the overall history of public relations specialization has been largely overlooked in public relations histories, despite the chronicling of some areas of specialization, like public affairs (for instance, McGrath, 2013) and investor relations (for instance, Miller & Dinan, 2000). Whilst public relations specializations have been identified as a trend or area of growth over decades (Black, 1995; Dibb, Simkin & Vancini, 1996; Jefkins, 1988; Morley, 2002; Sudhaman 2008; Tench & Yeomans, 2006, 2009, 2014, 2017; Tench & Waddington, 2021) these assertions tend not to be supported with quantitative data.

1.2. PR Professionalization, boundaries and pecializations

There has been a drive to establish a unified professional public relations identity. Public relations' professional project (Larson, 1977) aims to strengthen public relations practitioners' legitimacy and jurisdiction *within* the occupational field of public relations. This project has been well explained and analysed by several PR scholars (e.g., Bourne, 2019; Edwards, 2018; Edwards & Pieczka, 2013; Gregory, 2020; Merkelsen, 2011; Pieczka, 2000; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006; Reed, 2018). A revealing moment in the professionalisation project was when the leaders of the Institute of Public Relations successfully applied for Chartered status in 2005. They argued that the public relations itself was a boundaried, distinct profession (Gregory, 2023). Assertions of neatly boundaried traditional professions reflect an institutional sociological approach, emphasising the importance of abstract knowledge, routinization and regulation of specific sets of practices to close entry to other social groups (Freidson, 2001; Wilensky, 1964).

Recently, however, a more fluid concept of the public relations profession has emerged. This conceives public relations as a 'modern', 'corporate', 'executive' or 'entrepreneurial' profession (Bourne, 2019, 2022; Bowman & Hendy, 2019; Reed, 2018; Reed & Thomas, 2021). In contrast to the institutional approach, this more open concept is underpinned by a less deterministic systems perspective (Abbott, 1988; Luhmann, 1984; White, 1992). From this outlook, identities couple into and decouple from others continually, at times settling whilst remaining contingent. New professions are entrepreneurial, non-monopolistic and agile. Their challenges include having such 'a broad variety of services' that there is 'little scope to develop the sense of community and shared professional identity' (Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, & Hall, 2011: 446). Initial theorizing from this perspective centred on fields like management consultancy and project management (Muzio, *op.cit.*) but more recently it has been applied to public relations (Reed, 2018, 2021; Bourne, 2019, 2022).

Bourne (2019: 101789) identifies specialisation within public relations' 'ever-changing' professionalisation project. She suggests that public relations sub-specialisations like crisis communications, and corporate and strategic communication, emerge from 'hybridization' or 'fragmentation' at the shifting boundaries of public relations with 'adjacent' new professions like management consultancy and human resources. More broadly, post-disciplinarians, Nothhaft & Zerfass (2023) argue that the practice of communication (including public relations) does not conform to siloed boundaries. They suggest, 'disciplines are perhaps fuzzier than they pretend to be for academic respectability's sake' (2023: 255).

Central to these differing views on how professions are formed are debates on boundaries; not just what is to be defined as proper to a profession and what is not, but also how fixed these boundaries are. This is particularly pertinent to the question of the extent to which a trade publication is representative of a profession. We ask, how does *PR Week* frame specialisation? How does this framing relate to the promotion of public relations' boundaries and the magazine's brand ?

1.3. Institutional framing of professional boundaries, and field positions of trade media

The jurisdictional boundaries of professions (Abbott, 1988) are subject to 'potential change' (Bucher, Chreim, Langley, & Reay, 2016: 497). In this context of shifting boundaries, institutional players that promote the jurisdictions of specific professions include professional groups, academic units, the mass media and academic journals (Abbott, 1988; Waisbord, 2019) and communication departments Waisbord (2019).

Professional groups frame their areas of jurisdictions. Different framing strategies are outlined by Bucher et al. (2016) in their study of medical professional groups. Their four foci for framing are: i) identifying the 'issue' that needs to be addressed; ii) 'justifying' the institutional stance on the issue; iii) 'self-casting', through the professionals' framing of their own identity in relation to the issue, and iv) 'alter--casting' through the 'framing of other professionals' identities' in relation to the issue.

Notably, neither Waisbord (2019) nor Abbott (1988) ascribe an institutional role to the trade press in the promotion of jurisdictions. Edwards & Pieczka (2013), importantly however, through an analysis of 12 issues of *PR Week* in one year, argue that trade media act as an institutional sub-system through constructing occupational archetypes that 'provide the basis for public claims to legitimacy' (2013: 5). They find that public relations' jurisdiction is 'further reinforced' as 'valid knowledge about PR originates from within the profession, with expert practitioners, while … perspectives from outside the field are marginalized' (2013: 20). They argue that *PR Week*'s, and other trade magazines', coverage is 'reactive' and constructs archetypes aligned to the interests of 'powerful organisations and institutions'. Notably, they call for a future 'a systematic, historically sensitive study of trade media,' that 'may offer an interesting insight into change dynamics in the field' (2013: 21). This research seeks to provide such a study.

Taking more a distanced field stance, Bourne (2022) argues that *PR Week* plays the role of a third party. Journalistic scholarship positions the trade media as commercial, observational entities that may suffer from too close ties with the fields that it covers (Kjær & Slaatta, 2007). Magazine publishers need to focus on profit and championing their titles' brands (Whittaker, 2017). Profitability has become increasingly challenging. The revenue model has changed significantly with the internet causing a move from advertising-led revenue to subscription models (Stam & Scott, 2014) and income diversification, such as live events, data provision and the setting up of international franchises. A criticism of trade journalism is that specialist reporters' contacts can be both sources of news and clients. This confluence of interest has led some commentators to observe that specialist reporters can risk partiality by being so close to their industries (Turner & Orange, 2013).

In our period of study, *PR Week* was the central trade media in the UK public relations industry. Established in 1984, *PR Week* has been

described as, 'The most firmly established trade magazine for the PR industry with a sizable subscriber base' (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013:11). The magazine was issued to CIPR members as a benefit for much of the research period (at least from the early 1990s to 2010). ABC circulation numbers for the publication started at peak of 19,848 in the six-month period to June 1990, declining with fluctuations to 16,448 from July 2003-June 2004. A shift to a subscription model in 2004 did not arrest further decline in the audited circulation figures to 13,678 from July 2009-June 2010 (authorial communication with ABC).

The content of *PR Week* thus provides an opportunity to examine changes to the specialist occupational archetypes constructed within its pages over an extended period. These changes provide insight into the leading trade publication's boundary framing strategies during that period.

2. Method

This interpretative, exploratory, study is guided by two research questions.

- RQ1 Do the regular specialized pages (RSPs) in *PR Week* increase in importance within the publication, 1985-2010?
- RQ2 How do the editors and senior management frame their role in the shaping of practitioner identities through the publication of the RSPs?

To answer these questions, we employed a serial mixed-method approach, applying quantitative and qualitative content analysis to three data sets comprised of regular specialist page titles, editorial announcements about these page titles, and rare interviews with senior managers. Content analysis is a popular method of media analysis, providing systematic, objective, quantitative, replicable, and valid data; particularly useful for identifying and describing communications content and its change (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2004; Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). We supplemented the content analysis with some use of critical discourse analysis in relation to title absence (Schröter & Taylor, 2018).

The study starts in 1985, the first full year the magazine was published. It closes in 2010. After this period, the title changed into a monthly publication in 2013 (Press Gazette, 2013) and later was only published on-line. Our research period facilitates a consistent weekly printed magazine format for content analysis.

The first data set was a random sample of 222 issues of *PR Week* (UK), drawn across the 26-year period to identify the presence, names, and volume of RSPs. April and October issues were examined, as these were six months apart. Only seven issues could not be located. Their total pages were calculated through year averages. Extraneous supplements (often about PR awards) were excluded.

The second data set was all the editorial announcements about the introduction of RSPs in *PR Week* during that period (Freeman 2004; PR Week 1995; PR Week 1997; PR Week 1999a; PR Week 1999b; PR Week 2001; PR Week 2006; Rogers 2008) .

The third data set was a rare set of interviews with former *PR Week* senior managers about the rationale for the publication of the RSPs. These interviews gave access to previously unheard private perspectives of influential figures in public relations history. We included senior managers from 1990–2010, in editorial and publishing positions. One editor from the 1980s declined our interview request, citing insufficient recall of events. The interviewees were:

- Howard Smith: Editor, 1990-1991;
- Stephen Farish. News Editor 1990, Editor 1992-1996; senior management roles as Publisher and Managing Director from 1996-2010;
- Kate Nicholas: Deputy Editor 1997, Editor 1998, Editor-Chief 2003 and Associate Publisher in the mid-noughties.

The first data set facilitated the measuring, or not, of an overall trend in the RSPs of *PR Week*. The second data set of editorial announcements gave the public editorial justifications of the introduction of specialist pages at the time. The third data set of rare interviewees with senior managers, gave insight into publishers' perceptions of specialist identities and the magazine's commercial and journalistic priorities.

To answer RQ1 we examined the first two data sets. Firstly, we collated the names of RSP titles (a title used in at least three weeks of a month's issues) and counted the volume of page numbers and the number of pages in relation to total issue sizes. From these data, we undertook a nonparametric linear formal time-trend analysis to test for statistically significant trends in the data (Ely, Dawson, Lemke, & Rosenberg, 1997). Two coders independently gave page titles subject descriptors (domain names). These were: 'City', 'City and Corporate', 'Media', 'International', 'Public sector', 'Voluntary sector', 'Public affairs', 'Healthcare' and 'Technology'. Subject descriptors were determined by the overall type of sector/practice areas. Inter-coder reliability on these descriptors was 89 per cent, arising from different interpretations of the 'City' (in the late 1980s and early 1990s); later replaced by 'City and Corporate' (from 2004) RSP. As the term 'Corporate' is broader than 'City' we then decided that 'City' alone warranted one descriptor, and 'City and Corporate' another.

Secondly, we analyzed the eight editorial announcements (EAs) about the introduction or expansion of RSPs. These were labelled EA 1–8. We examined the prominence (page position and allocation or not of a headline), size, and authorship of these announcements. We also noted absences of announcements of the first city and media pages (EA) −1 and −2, thereby using critical discourse analysis (Schröter & Taylor, 2017). Whilst 'discourse' can be defined as being 'above the level of sentences' (Krippendorff, 2003: 16), we posit that page titles can be considered as discourse. This is because trade publications, like *PR Week*, exert power through the specialist pages (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013) and each regular specialist page title draws readers' attention to that page.

To investigate RQ2, we analysed the editors' framing of the decisions to publish RSPs or not. This was through content analysis of the editorial interviews in dataset 3 and through critical discourse analysis of the RSP titles from dataset 1. Semi-structured, telephone interview questions, focused on the editors' motivations to introduce and or withdraw RSPs. Unlike the first two data sets which were in the public domain and therefore 'front stage', these interviews were 'backstage' in that they were leading actors' reflections. Interview transcripts and notes were analyzed using framework analysis for qualitative data (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013). The coding of the announcements and interviews in the first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2021) was initially open (Gale et al., 2013). The initial coding identified that *PR Week*'s editors feared that the PR market was fragmenting through practitioners' growing affinities with specialist areas. This concern became the 'issue' investigated. Accordingly, the codes were revised using categories inspired by Bucher et al.'s (2016) study of trade association's professional boundary work. Specifically, Bucher et al.'s four foci for framing strategies for professional field positions and the two dimensions of position centrality and status were adapted. The six coding categories used were:

i) The framing of *PR Week*'s 'issue' of the fragmented identities of different public relations specialists.

ii) The framing of *PR Week*'s 'justifications' for the publication or withdrawal of RSPs.

iii) The framing of *PR Week*'s role in the representation of specialisms through the specialist pages. We newly call this *media-casting* in place of the 'self-casting' strategy. This category was adapted because *PR Week*, as a trade publication, had a mediating role. The practitioners did not directly self-cast their sense of professional identity.

iv) *PR Week*'s framing of other professional identities; 'alter-casting'.

v) The 'centrality' of public relations specializations to public relations.

vi) The 'status' of public relations and public relations specializations.

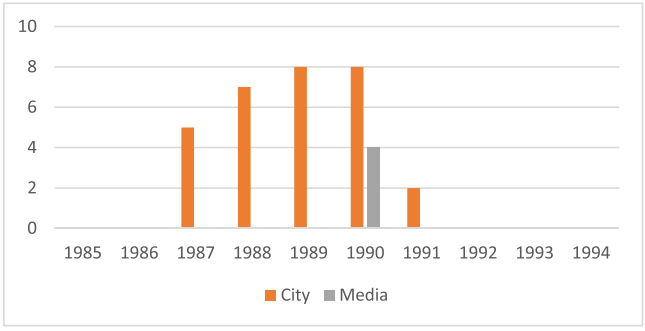
We also examined whether the word 'PR' appeared in the RSP titles.

3. Results

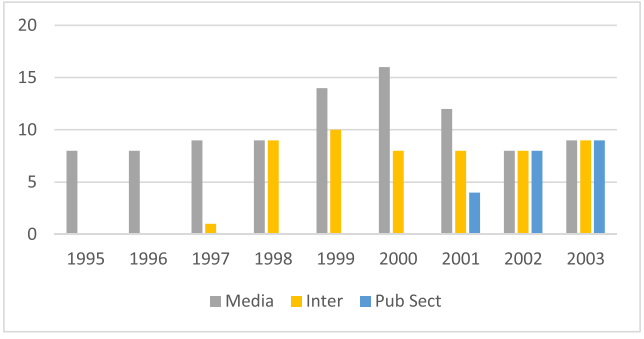
In the results we looked the number of RSPs by domains, and to what extent there was growth of such RSPs. We also examined the editors' framing of the RSPs.

3.1. PR Week exhibits a growing number of specialist page areas 1985–2010

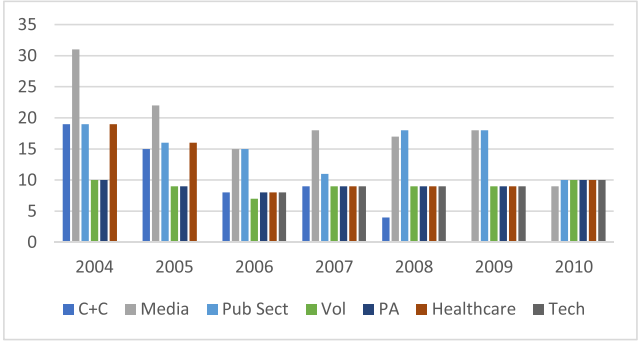
In the quarter century from 1985, *PR Week* featured nine areas of specialization through its RSPs. The publication initially had no RSPs. Two specialisms emerged prior to 1991; as presented in Panel (a) of Fig. 1, a 'City' RSP from 1987, and a 'Media' RSP by April 1990 (introduced in late 1989). After three years without RSPs, 'Media' reappeared in 1995, joined by 'International' from 1997-2003, and 'Public Sector' from 2001 in Panel (b). From 2004 there was a proliferation of RSPs, with four new categories. There were seven RSPs from 2006 onwards in Panel (c).



Panel (a) 1985-1994



Panel (b) 1995-2003



Panel (c) 2004-2010

Fig. 1. Number of Regular Specialist Pages of *PR Week* by Category.

3.2. Trend of specialist pages confirmed, particularly from 1994-2010

Whilst there were some years in which specialist pages were not printed, on average, through the period, the proportion of specialist pages increased at 10.2 % per year. The apparent changes to this trend in 1991, 2004 and 2008 did not differ significantly from the long-term trend. From 1994 the annual increase was 10.7 %. The proportion of specialist pages published in *PR Week* is shown in Fig. 2. The vertical axis shows the percentage of RSPs relative to the full number of pages in issues (including advertisements). The horizontal axis shows each year from which the two-month sample was taken. A formal time-trend test found that the apparent upward trend shown in Fig. 2 was statistically significant (Spearman's $\rho = 0.92$; $p < 0.000$).

3.3. Editors' framing of specialist pages

We found evidence in the interviews, of three institutional framing strategies of Bucher et al., (2016). This was identifying a mobilising 'issue' (the detachment of specialists from PR); 'justifying' the institutional stance on the issue (rationales for the RSPs); and 'alter-casting' other professionals' identities in relation to the issue.

In addition, we found evidence of our adaptation of the remaining 'self-casting' institutional framing strategy into one of 'media casting' (how editors cast their roles in the introduction and withdrawal of specialist pages). These strategies were deployed to increase the 'centrality' and 'status' of the profession.

3.3.1. The issue: separate identity of specialists

PR Week's editors observed, and were concerned by, specialist practitioners' sense of detachment from public relations, in the 1990s and early noughties. This presented a risk to the publication in relation to circulation figures and income generation from clients in some profitable segments of the public relations market.

Nicholas, reflecting on the introduction of the public sector page in 2001, said she felt that public relations practitioners in the public sector, were "a different breed" from others. Similarly, financial PRs were "a different beast". Nicholas continued that when she oversaw the editorial redesign in 2004, which had six RSPs, she was responding to the different identities, cultures, and skills she observed within different sectors of the public relations industry. Notably, this 2004 redesign, which included the then highest number of specialist page titles, was timed in tandem with the introduction of the magazine's subscription model. This points to the links between the editorial and commercial interests of the magazine.

Farish recalled practitioners saying,

> '"Well we're not in PR, we're in public affairs; we're not in PR we're in investor relations; we're not in PR we are in healthcare … communications." So it was quite hard to find people and say "oh yeah, I'm in PR! "… Everyone was a specialist, because that sounded better.'

He recounted a typical lunch conversation with a senior financial communication public relations specialist in the 1990s:

> 'The first thing he said to me after we'd gone through the usual pleasantries was, "I don't really know why we're having this lunch". And I said, "What you mean?" And he goes, "Well, I'm not in PR" And I was going, "Really? But you are the doyenne of financial PR!"'

Some of these specialists had considerable economic capital and were potential lucrative clients. Farish said leading financial public relations specialists were,

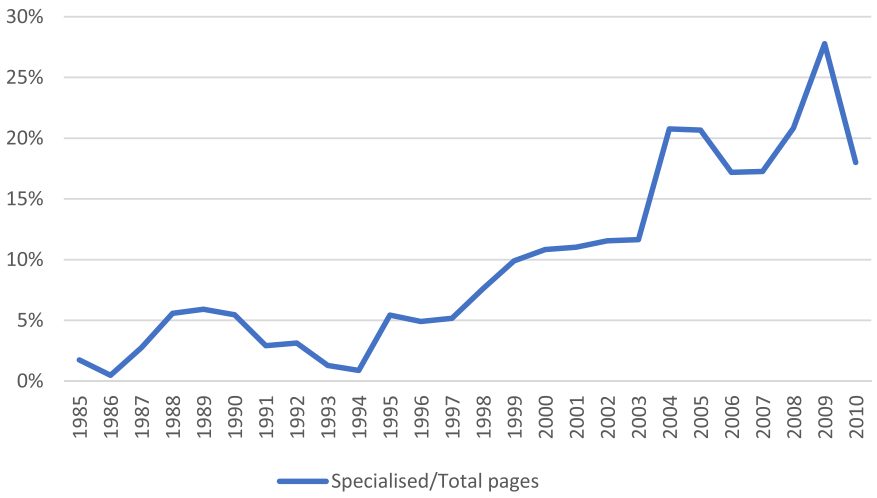


Fig. 2. Ratio of Specialist to Total Pages in *PR Week* 1985–2010.

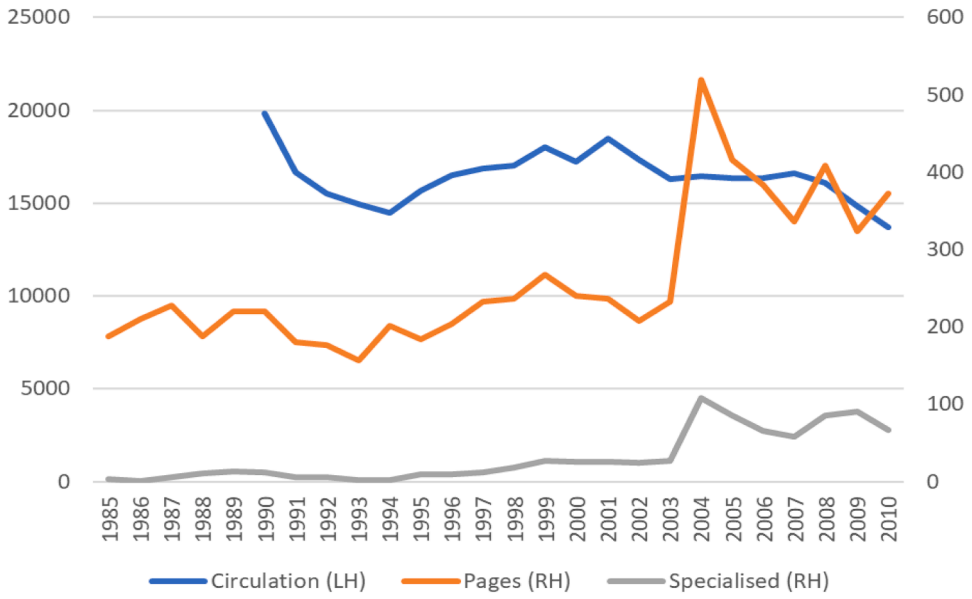


Fig. 3. Specialist Page Titles Relative to Overall Issue Size and Circulation.

> "pioneers of being able to charge massive fees in … takeover battles…where they were on success fees … And they had to position themselves as not being media [practitioners] but being a serious heavy-weight advisors on the level of corporate finance people, merchant bankers and those sorts of people".

He stated that Haymarket recognised this different sense of identity by launching *Investor Relations Quarterly* in the mid-1990s. Notably, the title of this publication did not include the words "public relations".

3.3.2. *Justifications for addition or withdrawal of specialist pages*

New RSPs were announced with increasing prominence and editorial justifications. Printed rationales included the circulation of practice and sector-related news to those working in specialisms. They also encompassed the noting of the trend of specialization within public relations and public relations' diversifications. They also extended to the relevance of a specialist page to practitioners not working in the named specialism and the grounding of the pages titles on reader research. By contrast, the withdrawals of RSPs were not announced.

The rationales editors later gave, in interview, for page introductions and withdrawals shed light into their commercial considerations. For example, whilst the financial sector was a highly profitable, and an important sub-field in PR, the publication had no dedicated financial page for over a decade (1992–2003). From 1992 to 1994 there were no RSPs because of the recession. When the RSPs resumed, financial PR was not included because *PR Week* struggled to get advertising revenue from this sub-sector and had competing commercial interests with Haymarket's launch of an alternative bespoke financial PR publication (that was shortly discontinued). *PR Week* set up a public sector page, when there was concern that *the Guardian* was attracting recruitment advertising for public sector public relations posts.

3.3.3. *Altercasting*

Editors identified a desire from public relations practitioners for public relations to be positioned with equal status advertising and management consultancies, allowing them to compete for budgets. Smith said that senior figures in public relations wanted *PR Week* to be a flagship publication for the public relations industry in the same way that Haymarket's *Campaign*, was an authoritative must-read in the advertising industry. Similarly, Farish recalled, "PR people want to be seen in the same bracket as management consultants."

3.3.4. Media-casting: how editors framed their editorial role in the introduction or withdrawal of specialist pages

In interview, editors framed their roles in terms of attending to the commercial interests of *PR Week* and Haymarket; trying to make *PR Week* relevant to specialists so that they self-identified with it and focusing on the editorial quality of the publication's brand.

The editors had commercial roles. Farish observed:

> "I wouldn't draw too much direct correlation between numbers of pages or things expanding or contracting and what was going on in PR Business at the time. They are sort of broadly linked. But actually, you've also got, *PR Week*'s journey to find a viable and profitable business model is driving some of that as well."

The editors also described taking on a unifying role within the PR industry. For instance, an editorial from Nicholas (PR Week, 2001) stated that all practitioners had much learn from Public Sector public relations. In the announcement of 2004, she referred to the diversity of specialization in the industry.

In addition, *PR Week* casts itself as a champion of public relations by focusing on specialist areas that, through the mantle of expertise, give kudos to the profession. As Farish reflected,

> "we had to fit with PR because that was in our title, *PR Week*… but we were also on the side of trying to champion the professionalisation … we were on the side of the angels… You can see… specialisation in that context as well."

Smith was also conscious of the journalistic quality of *PR Week*. He felt that when he took over *PR Week*, the publication, "was just too flimsy, too trite and it was at a time when PR as a whole was battling to get more recognition." One way Howard sought to remedy this was to allocate journalists specialist beats for the general news pages. These areas included specific companies and sectors. Subsequent editors, when resourcing the RSPs, recruited expert reporters and commentators to enhance the editorial reputation of the publication. For instance, Nicholas signed up European business journalist, Anthony Hilton for the Corporate and City page.

3.3.5. The centrality of PR specialisms to PR

Editors reported that *PR Week* positioned public relations' specialisms within public relations, given the word "PR" in the magazine's masthead. As Farish reflected about financial public relations specialists:

> "these are lucrative, really heavy-weight parts of the industry. We don't want, as *PR Week*, to be held back by the term 'PR' either. So we need to make sure we are, if that's our overarching brand, that we are finding ways to take these people seriously and make them feel that we're for them as well as for everyone else."

Whilst editors observed the separation specialists felt from public relations, editorial announcements in *PR Week* about the introduction of RSPs challenged these sentiments. For instance, in the 2004 announcement of the redesign of the magazine, 'the diversification of roles within the PR business' was given as a reason for six RSPs. Here, the word "within" sets specialisms of corporate and city, public sector, healthcare, media, public affairs, and voluntary sector inside the boundaries of public relations.

Public relations specializations were also included in other *PR Week* activities. Income generators included the *PR Week* Awards that included of specialist categories (Garsten & Howard, 2011) and training events, for instance, on crisis public relations. Editors recalled digital activities like email alerts about different specialist areas.

3.3.6. Editors' perceptions of the status of PR and PR specialisms

All editors cited problems with the status of public relations during the period. Smith said public relations battled with perceptions of being lightweight and an afterthought in boardrooms in the early 1990s.

Ethical concerns, arising from the highly publicized work of publicists and practitioners, like Max Clifford preoccupied the industry, recalled Farish. Furthermore, the problems of mistaking public relations as just media relations, the need to have robust evaluative metrics and to measure Return on Investment were identified by Farish and Nicholas. Farish described a status anxiety in the industry,

> 'PR people want to be seen in the same bracket as management consultants. It's what they [are] all aspiring to. "We want to be seen as management but we're not. We're advisors; we're not just people who place stories in the media and do the Friday night drop and all that sort of stuff."'

Conversely, specialists were associated with expertise. Farish reflected, "Everyone was a specialist, because that sounded better."

Notably, announcements of new specialist pages became increasingly prominent during the research period. This indicates the growing importance of the specialist pages. Remarkably, there were no editorial announcements of the first two specialist pages in 1987 and in 1990. However, after this, each new RSP was announced. These announcements over time were given more editorial space. They were increasingly placed under a headline. Announcements changed in status, from just being included in news items to being highlighted in editorials. For instance, in 1997 (PR Week, 1997) the news of the introduction of the international page was covered in a couple of lines under a bullet point on the front page. By contrast, in 2008 the rise in the volume of specialist pages in the magazine's redesign was discussed in a centre-page editorial (Rogers, 2008: 28–29).

4. Discussion

4.1. Trend of RSPs in PR Week

Critical public relations historians like L'Etang (2016) warn against presumptions of progression in public relations histories. Our study of the construction of 'specialist' archetypes in the pages of *PR Week* supports such circumspection. Formally testing the prevailing assumption of a trend towards increased public relations specialization (Tench & Yeomans, 2006, 2009, 2014, 2017; Tench & Waddington, 2021), we did find a statistically significant 10.7 per cent annual increase in the proportion of *PR Week* pages dedicated to RSPs 1985–2010, particularly after 1994. Nevertheless, our examination of the introduction and withdrawal of specific specialist archetypes embodied by the RSPs during this time indicates a punctuated process of professional reframing in which the *PR Week* editors and senior figures in the industry were central protagonists.

4.2. Editors' role in the framing of practitioner identities through the publication of the RSPs

In introducing RSPs, *PR Week*'s editors deployed most of Bucher et al. (2016) professional framing strategies. The waning self-identification of practitioners with public relations comprised the mobilizing 'issue'. The construction of specific specialist archetypes through RSPs were 'justified' as responses to emerging identities in the industry to which PR practitioners could relate and learn from. Interacting with the expressed needs of senior figures in the profession, the editors 'alter-casted' reconstructed PR-with-specialists as authorities, worthy we suggest, of similar recognition as advertising and management consultants.

The editors *media-casted* in place of *Bucher* et al.'s strategy (2016) of 'self-casting'. They provided value to the specialists and supported the unity of the profession, whilst increasing the integrity of the publication's brand. The editors positioned public relations specialisms centrally to public relations, with more rigorous journalism, to enhance the 'status' of public relations against similar but more 'heavyweight' professions.

4.3. Sheep dog

PR Week's editors introduced RSPs, with 'justifications', in part, to broaden the appeal of *PR Week* to specialist practitioners who no longer, or did not primarily, self-identify with public relations. Institutional 'sheepdogs' round up diverse groups (Carlyle, 2013:3). We believe the metaphor is apt to describe a 'media-casting' role of *PR Week*'s senior management. The editors set out to round up groups of straying practitioners back into the folds of "*PR" Week*. Muzio et al. (2010) observe that new professions can lack a sense of community. The editors actively sought to consolidate communities of interest through the RSPs. Redesigns are used to connect with readers' interests and to bolster readership (Nagarajan, 2013). The RSPs were often introduced as part of the magazine's redesigns, as in 1995, 1999 and 2004 (Freeman, 2004; PR Week, 1995, 1999b).

Such a sheepdog drove Haymarket's business interests. Whilst *PR Week* repeatedly stated that the RSPs reflected the PR industry (Freeman, 2004; PR Week, 1999b, 2001; Rogers, 2008), this does not preclude times when commercial interests predominated, as discussed below in Section 4.5.

4.4. Active and fuzzy boundary setter

Sheepdogs are boundary setters (Marini, Llewellyn, Belson, & Lee, (2018)). By rounding up fragmenting actors, *PR Week* played an active role in the boundary setting of the occupational field of public relations. Whilst this trade publication did 'reinforce' the 'jurisdiction' of PR, as Edwards and Pieczka insightfully suggest, we posit that *PR Week* was more pro-active than Edwards & Pieczka's (2013:21) suggestion of the magazine having been 'reactive' by 'normalizing particular values, practices and knowledge share by trade and professional associations'. We argue the trade publication had an active institutional role in boundary setting, driven by its own agenda. Editors had a commercial issue with a splintering readership and actively sought to re-shape practitioner identities to bring back fragmenting areas of public relations back into the field. They spoke of basing this on readership research with no mention of professional associations, though *PR Week* was a benefit of CIPR membership. This position was in addition to the acknowledged roles of professional bodies and academic journals in boundary-setting and has not been acknowledged in some seminal texts (Abbott, 1988; Waisbord, 2019).

Nevertheless, the boundaries created by the RSPs were fuzzy, given that over 95 % of the RSP titles did not include the disciplinary label 'PR'. This in- and out-ness resonates with scholarship attesting to the liquidity of new professions (Muzio et al., 2011) like public relations (Bourne, 2019, 2022; Bowman & Hendy, 2019; Edwards & Pieczka, 2013; Reed, 2021); the fragmenting of public relations at its boundaries (Bourne, 2019, 2022); and scholarship about the interdisciplinary of theories relevant to PR (Nothhaft & Zerfass, 2023; Taylor, 2023).

4.5. Commercial brand champion

Given that "PR" was in the masthead of the publication, the legitimacy and 'status' of the discipline was critical to *PR Week*'s editors in their framing. Senior management sought to enhance the status of public relations through specialist coverage as identified by Edwards & Pieczka (2013). What has not been recognized is that this legitimacy, and the greater expertise required for specialist reporting and commentary, also enhanced *PR Week*'s brand. The convergence between an industry's brand and that of their associated trade publications is a neglected area of research.

The central place of *PR Week* in PR's professional reframing activity during the period supports Edward and Piecska's (2013) characterization of the publication as an 'institutional subsystem.' Notably, the institutional subsystem and the scope of reframing activity was always commercially constrained. For instance, the lack of a city page for over a decade was due to the recession, to problems in getting clients from financial public relations, and to Haymarket's plans to launch a different financial public relations publication (as discussed in Section 3.2.2). These specific commercial motivations give substance to Edwards and Piecska's (2013: 20) general critical warning that there were 'limits to the effectiveness' of *PR Week* as an 'institutional subsystem', given its need to 'protect financial return'. They also show that whilst public relations studies of *PR Week* are at the intersection between the occupational practices of journalism and public relations, the predominant driver can be the media's commercial interests. Hence, the specialist archetypes circulated to public relations practitioners through the RSPs (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013) need to be scrutinized. Our study also suggests that whilst *PR Week* is a useful source to identify discourses about the public relations profession (Bourne, 2019, 2022; Edwards & Pieczka, 2013) the commercial perspectives of editors should also be researched to understand which precise economic and commercial interests affect coverage.

5. Limitations and areas of future research

This is the first study to focus on the overall history of public relations specialization in the UK. To investigate further whether public relations specialization is a trend, future historical studies could investigate other relevant aspects of public relations. For example, the number and types of public relations vacancies advertised; public relations consultancy specialisms marketed; sector groups of professional associations; and/or public relations awards.

Within the context of *PR Week*, there could be analysis of the editorial content of specialist pages during the research period and then digital editions of *PR Week*. This initial study included the rarely sought perspectives of three of *PR Week*'s senior managers. Nevertheless, these personal narratives were retrospective and therefore subject to possible memory bias. Not all the editors who served during the period were interviewed. Historical accounts though, inevitability have gaps (L'Etang, 2008). Future research could also examine the perspectives of the clients and readers of *PR Week*.

6. Conclusion

Given the trend towards RSPs in the principal trade journal of the industry, PR Week, our study suggests that UK PR professionals may have increasingly developed specialised self-identities from the mid-1980s onwards; . However, when examining the publication of RSPs we find little evidence of a deterministic process. Rather, our examination of the deployment of RSPs r, finds a punctuated process of professional reframing in which the journal occupied an active and central place.

Building on the scholarship of Edwards & Pieczka (2013), we suggest that trade media play an active institutional role in boundary setting that has previously been unacknowledged, by Abbott (1988) and Waisbord (2019). We newly find that, like a sheepdog, *PR Week* played a proactive institutional role in the professional reframing of public relations around specialisms. The attempt to enhance industry legitimacy by promoting specialisms generated fuzzy boundaries to these archetypes, generally excluding references to 'PR' at all. Narrower commercial interests of the journal at times conflicted with its reframing activity indicating that the specialist archetypes that emerged cannot be tightly mapped to professional practice.

In striving to be the flagship of the PR industry, *PR Week* cannot be seen as a simple reflection of that industry. The commercial interests of the journal led it to engage with the legitimacy problems beset by the industry and to actively deploy professional reframing strategies to enhance the centrality of specialists and the status of the profession. The introduction of regular specialist pages comprised 'media-casting' and *alter-casting* strategies attempting to engage with practitioners' waning identification with 'PR' by constructing specialist archetypes.

In this paper we also successfully applied and adapted Bucher et al.'s (2016) framing strategies for the boundary work of professional organisations' discourses to a trade publication's content. We revised one of Bucher et al.'s strategies, re-terming 'self-casting' strategy as a *media casting* strategy in the context of a trade publication's framing of a profession's boundaries. Furthermore, we also newly considered page titles as discourse.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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Appendix 1. Page Title Subjects in Relation to PR Specialist Categories Taxonomies

Subjects of specialist pages in PR 1985-2010	Relates Morley's (2002) Categories of Specialisation	Relates to a CIPR (2019) area of Specialisation	Relates to Agency Descriptors in the PRCA's (2020) Matching Service
City	'PR Practice Areas'	Role specialisation and Sector Specialisation	Agency Discipline and Industry Sector
City and Corporate	'PR Practice Areas'	Role specialisation and Sector specialisation	Agency Discipline and Industry Sector
Healthcare	'Industry, business or organization'	Sector Specialisation	Industry Sector
International	None	None	Location
Media	Technical Skills	Role Specialisation and Specialist Services (media monitoring)	Agency Discipline
Public Affairs	'PR Practice Areas'	Role Specialisation	Agency Discipline
Public Sector	'Industry, business or organization'	Not listed in examples of specialisations	Industry Sector
Technology	'Industry, business or organization'	Not listed in examples of specialisations	Industry Sector and Specialist Services (audio/video production and website)
Voluntary Sector	'Industry, business or organization'	Not listed in examples of specialisations	Industry Sector

Appendix 2. Time-trend analysis

Apparent trends from visual inspection of a data series may represent random variation, particularly when there is great variability from year to year. So, we undertook a formal time-trend analysis to examine the extent to which the apparent trend of increased specialisation during the period was statistically significantly different from the expected variation (Ely et al., 1997).

As the incidence of specialist pages is a discrete (count) rather than continuous variable, a binomial or Poisson distribution is more suitable for comparison than a normal distribution. Given that the incidents in one year are likely to be related to some extent with those in another as a specialism continues or develops, the incidents are not independent, an assumption of standard regression models.

Nevertheless, as the incidence of specialist pages is likely to be driven by commercial and social imperatives, the underlying expected distribution for comparison is unknown. So, the starting point is an assumption free nonparametric approach. Two measures were used, Spearman's rank correlation, which analyses change in ranks over time rather than changes in actual values, and Kendall's tau, which measures how many steps are needed to put a series in order.

The comparison of the observed incidents to the expected variation showed positive and statistically significant correlation coefficients (Spearman's rho = 0.92, $p > 0.000$; Kendall's tau-a = 0.78, $p > 0.000$), confirming the upward trend through the period.

Having determined that there is a time-trend in the data, we then estimated the rate of change with a fractional logistic regression model:

Proportion of specialist pages =.

$e\beta 0 + \beta 1 \times 1 + e\beta 0 + \beta 1x$.

The regression slope of the proportion of specialised pages to years was 0.125 ($p > 0.000$; Pseudo $R^2 = 0.07$, $p > chi^2 = 0.000$). That is, the proportion of specialised pages increased during the period as a whole on average 12.5 % per year.

Visual inspection also suggests a structural break in the trend 1995, with a much more rapid increase in specialist pages thereafter and 2008, with a tailing off. We tested the existence of structural breaks in the data series with an unknown break date with the Stata sbsingle command following a linear regression. This conducts a Wald test at each possible break date then selects the year with the maximum Wald test statistic (Stata Corp 2014). The Wald test evaluates the extent to which the explanatory variable (year) contributes to the model explaining the outcome (proportion of specialist pages). The sbsingle results found the maximum Wald statistic was in 1995 but was not statistically significant (swald 8.1723, $p > 0.192$).

Appendix 3. Regular Specialist Page Titles 1990–2010

Year	C+C	C News	Business	Finance	PR City	Media Snaps	Med Rel News	Med Rel Anal	Media	International	Pub Sect	Vol Sec	Pub A News	Pub
1990					4	4								
1991					2	2								
1992														
1993														
1994														
1995									8					
1996									4					
1997									8	1				
1998									9	9				
1999									15	10				
2000									16	8				
2001									12	8	4			
2002									8	8	8			
2003									9	9	9			
2004		11					1	1	15		13	7		
2005	14							4	13		16	9		
2006	8						8	7			14	7	7	
2007	7							7	7		8	7	7	
2008	14							4	14		18	9	4	
2009	18								18		18	9		
2010	9								9		9	9		
C+C = city and corporate														
Tech = Technology														

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