The public relations profession as discursive boundary-work

1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) has spent more than a century as a professional project, marked by a struggle with adjacent professional fields for market control, social closure and elite status (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013; Edwards, 2014; Larson 2012; Reed, 2018). According to Bucher et al. (2016: 499), boundaries "demarcate professions from other professions and sub-professions with distinctive status and centrality in the field. However, these boundaries are not fixed." This observation holds true when applied to PR's professional project, which is ever-changing – encompassing boundary-work with adjacent fields such as journalism, advertising, marketing, human resources, management consultancy, accountancy and data management. PR's boundary-work has also led to fragmentation into other communication specialisms, including corporate communications, investor relations (IR), marketing communications and reputation management. Several studies have looked at contestation between PR and adjacent fields (Bourne, 2015a; Christensen et al., 2008; Hutton, 2010; Johansen & Anderson, 2012). However, the wider literature on professionalisation lacks a systematic account of how professions discursively *construct* their boundaries, or how differences in field position can influence a profession's use of discursive strategies to defend or *contest* its boundaries (Bucher et al., 2016). This matters for the deepening of PR's scholarship, since an effective exploration of the PR profession must account for professions as socially-constructed, and include studies of PR's jurisdictional disputes (Abbott, 1988; Bourne, 2015a; Zorn, 2002).

This article introduces into PR theory, a discourse analytical framework *(See Figure 1)* for deconstructing boundary-work between PR and adjacent professions. The methodological framework can be applied in exploring different contestations in professional discourses, for instance: a single profession protecting its existing boundaries, expanding its boundaries further, or fragmenting into new, hybridised professions – thus creating new professional boundaries altogether. By finding more diverse ways to analyse the PR profession, we can increase the complexity of what we find there (Phillips, 1995). The discourse analytical framework and accompanying discussion offered here, answers the call to dismantle silo-thinking about PR activity, through a methodology designed to examine PR's intersections with other fields.

A short stroll over to marketing literature underscores the value of dismantling silo-thinking in PR. Svensson's (2006: 337) work on marketing's professional project reveals shared concerns over marketing's lack of professional trust and credibility; public suspicion and repugnance for marketing techniques; similar calls for formal jurisdiction and professional credentials; and mutual apprehension over encroachment from management consultancy and other fields. There is further value in dismantling silos where PR as an occupational and intellectual domain continues to guard its authority and terrain from 'others', such as activist groups which *also* engage in PR practice (Demetrious, 2013).

Crucially, dismantling silos with adjacent disciplines could establish deeper understanding of PR and its legitimacy in late modernity (Bourne, 2015a; Demetrious, 2013). For example, we need greater scrutiny of PR's involvement in 'wicked problems' such as the vast 'persuasion architecture' constructed by Amazon, Google, Facebook and other digital advertising platforms (Tufekci, 2017). Selling everything from protein shakes to politics, this trillion-

dollar persuasion architecture has taken on dystopian tones. Aided by advertising, marketing, PR and data science professions, these platforms have spread disinformation, isolated citizens in digital 'filter bubbles', and triggered crises in digital privacy.

The framework introduced here draws on theoretical and methodological approaches to professional discourse. The framework is specifically influenced by scholarship on professional boundary-work (Bucher et al., 2016; Gieryn, 1983; Lewis, 2012; Thomas & Hewitt, 2011), and builds on existing methodological approaches in the field of professional discourse analysis (Bhatia, 2010; Gunnarsson, 2009; Wong, 2014). While the article draws on a range of international sources, many case examples are drawn from the UK.

2. **PR's professional project**

My theoretical starting point for exploring PR's discursive boundaries is the sociology of professions (Abbott, 1988; Larson 2012), which positions PR as an ongoing professional project struggling over jurisdictions in order to survive (Edwards, 2014; Edwards & Pieczka, 2013; Reed, 2018). Abbott (1988) contends that professions do not evolve in linear fashion, but develop when jurisdictions become vacant. This may happen because a professional jurisdiction is newly-created, for example, when new technologies emerge; or because an earlier tenant has lost its 'grip' on a particular jurisdiction, or left it altogether. Abbott (1988) argues that the history of jurisdictional disputes determines the *real* history of any profession. PR is no exception. From Abbott's perspective then, an effective exploration of the PR profession must include studies of PR's jurisdictions, and above all, its jurisdictional disputes with adjacent fields.

As a profession, PR provides much scope for interest and analysis. Struggles around PR's boundaries are on the rise, often played out through industry texts. Whether traditional or modern, all occupations engaged in a professional project must establish their legitimacy on an ongoing basis (Abbott, 1988). However, as a new or 'entrepreneurial' profession (Muzio et al., 2008), PR differs from traditional professions such as medicine or law. While the field encompasses longstanding practices, PR's collective expertise only began to formalise under a professional umbrella in the early twentieth century. Although entrepreneurial professions have borrowed several features from traditional professions, this is largely a symbolic exercise, since PR and other entrepreneurial professions operate differently. As with other 'new' professions, PR's professional associations are embryonic, with no mandatory membership, social credentials or special education required (Muzio et al., 2008). Thus, entrepreneurial professions have few professional credentials or independent sources of knowledge, and remain largely open, governed by market mechanisms (Muzio et al., 2008).

Consequently, unlike traditional professions, de facto control over the PR profession is weak – deliberately so, argue Muzio et al. (2008), because entrepreneurial professions are highly responsive to the organisations and cultures they serve. As such, PR's longstanding obsession with defining PR activity is futile (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2005). Not only are entrepreneurial professions active in the construction of knowledge through their use of language and relationship skills with client organisations, they are also continually developing *new* forms of knowledge – together with different methods for its production, organisation and delivery – adopting "radically different strategies and organisational configurations" as needed (Muzio et al., 2008:4). So often do entrepreneurial professions like PR appear to change the rules of the game, that, increasingly, they challenge and displace traditional forms of professional knowledge and organisation (Muzio et al. 2008). Thus, after more than a century

as a professional project, PR *remains* a profession in the making, with scores of conflicting professional definitions, unclear professional boundaries, and a constantly shifting nature of professional knowledge – both technical and managerial – in response to client needs. Professional licensing and regulation remain rare, and PR is practised differently around the world, shaped by different socio-political structures.

PR's jurisdictional struggles have become more pressing in the early twenty-first century, as professional boundaries are redrawn yet again, amidst massive technological change. Contemporary PR requires new specialist knowledge and skills to reap social and economic rewards (Larson 2012). These technological changes represent a critical moment in PR's professional discourses – not just because of reshaping PR skills and expertise, but because these same technological changes are reshaping the skills and expertise of *adjacent* fields, including journalism, advertising, marketing, accounting and management consultancy; the latter illustrated by Deloitte and Accenture's recent foray into advertising (Garrahan, 2017). PR currently battles for jurisdiction over establishing digital media centres, producing creative ideas and digital content, managing stakeholder data and measuring stakeholder engagement.

In addition to technological change, PR and other professions are further affected by changing global demographics, politics and economics (USC Annenberg, 2018). Candlin (2000:10) describes such 'critical moments' in a professional discourse as the greatest moments of challenge "where the communicative competence of the participants is at a premium". This is borne out by the extent and frequency to which PR's professional associations now communicate externally about PR. One national survey found that seventy percent of all PR professionals believe their profession will change considerably or

drastically over the next five years (USC Annenberg, 2018). In the twenty-first century, "locating *how*, *where* and *why* jurisdictional claims are made" is therefore essential for capturing how communication fields develop in new digital environments (Lewis, 2012: 842).

3. PR as professional discourse

Definitions of discourse are slippery across the different methodological approaches. However, most discourse analysts can agree that a discourse is "an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002: 3). Discourse analysis, itself, is an entire field of research that belongs to no particular discipline. It is an empirical method, insofar as we gain knowledge via direct observation. It can be both 'quantitative' or 'qualitative' (Daymon & Holloway, 2010), so it is best not to locate it in this way. The literature is vast and very confusing, as not all discourse analysts are transparent about their methods. Indeed, some of the most widely-cited discourse scholars are the least likely to provide researchers with conceptual frameworks for understanding their techniques. This is because discourse analysis is a 'craft like' process, often difficult to specify in writing (Potter, 1998). However, discourse analysis remains a significant way to find meaning in a text's structure, and to delve into participants' perspectives or subjectivities.

PR researchers have been using discourse analytical methods for years. Most of these studies seek to understand PR practice as a form of discourse work, with attendant impacts on society. These studies have variously employed Critical Discourse Analysis (Bhatia, 2006; Caruana & Crane, 2008; Chaka, 2014; Ciszek & Logan, 2018); Cultural Discourse Analysis

(Hiu Ying Choy, 2018); Framing Analysis (Bardhan, 2013); and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Bourne, 2017; Motion & Leitch, 2007). Such approaches allow researchers to understand discursive entanglements at regional, national and international levels. Several PR studies have applied discourse analysis specifically to explore PR's professional discourses (Demetrious, 2013; Evangelisti Allori & Garzone, 2011; Williams and Apperley, 2009). These studies differ from examinations of PR's interventions in societal discourses, since professional discourse spans the language and texts produced by professionals for their own occupational interests.

Professional discourse can be both situated and dynamic, with constantly changing professional language designed as a means of distinction (Gunnarson 2009:17). Learning how to communicate like other professionals plays an integral part in getting into a profession, particularly for professions that rely heavily on communication (Wong, 2014). Broadly speaking, professional discourse can take place within a single profession; or between two separate professions; as well as between professionals and third party groups such as clients, customers and prospects, suppliers, governments and regulators (Bucher et al., 2016; Wong, 2014). For instance, Bhatia's (2010) work on interdiscursivity in annual report production explores discursive boundary-work between PR, accountancy, legal and economic professions. To these analytical categories, Wong (2014) adds regulatory discourses, such as professional codes of practice. However, existing published work on professional discourse analysis is fairly narrow in scope, since most studies concentrate on micro-level discourses, that is to say, communication between *individual* professionals within their organisational settings (e.g. Bhatia 2010, Gunnarson 2012). By contrast, macro-level methods highlight the limitations of PR's own organisation-centric professional discourses, by repositioning PR discourses within field-level contexts such as globalisation, cultural

imperialism and social inequality (Bardhan, 2013). These interventions are vital, argues Demetrious (2013), since PR is more subversive than adjacent professions such as advertising, where PR's intent is political, and where processes go largely undetected by target publics.

PR profession as boundary-work

The role and status of PR and adjacent professions must be understood in relation to other occupational groups whenever traditional boundaries between professions are tested and constructed, and hybrid forms of professionalism emerge (Thomas & Hewitt, 2011). Boundaries define a profession's access to material and non-material resources such as power, status, and remuneration (Abbott, 1988). Potential threats to a profession's jurisdiction means that stakes are high, leading professions to struggle over boundaries in order to maintain, change or broaden their practice domains, and delimit insiders versus outsiders, while deciding what counts as ethical practice (Bucher et al., 2016; Lewis, 2012).

In considering PR's boundary claims, I engage with two influential studies on boundary-work. The first, by Bucher et al. (2016: 498), contends that focusing on professions' discursive boundary-work is "both theoretically interesting and practically important", because professions negotiate and position themselves against other fields by creating and distributing various official documents and other texts. Boundary-work consists of strategies used to establish, obscure or dissolve distinctions between groups of actors (Bucher et al., 2016; Gieryn, 1983). Professions continually negotiate boundaries in their desire to expand or protect their autonomy (Bucher et al., 2016; Gieryn, 1983). However, while Bucher et al. argue that professions also seek to monopolise autonomy; for entrepreneurial professions,

monopolies are less of a feature. For this reason, I incorporate the work of Muzio et al. (2011) to suggest that newer professions such as PR will, instead, hybridise and fragment into sub-disciplines.

The second influential source on discursive boundary-work is Demetrious' (2013) exploration of PR as activism. Demetrious's approach is in turn shaped by Foucault's (1972: 26) contention that "an investigation of an individual discourse, such as medicine and law, only reveals a narrow and specific understanding". A Foucauldian approach therefore urges discourse analysts to interrogate the unity of professional discourses, break them up and determine whether "they can be legitimately reformed; or whether other groupings should be made" (Foucault, 1972: 26). Demetrious (2013) draws on Foucault to question the PR profession's discursive unity by subjecting PR's central tenets to scrutiny vis-à-vis the discourses of grassroots activists and their campaigns.

3.1. Expansionary discourses

The first area of field-level boundary-work to be discussed is *expansionary discourses.* These discourses expand authority or expertise into domains claimed by other professions or occupations. Boundary-work in expansionary discourses heightens the contrast between rival professions in ways that flatter the aggressor's side (Gieryn, 1983). Expansionary discourses are therefore evident in talk, text or images where a profession opts to go on the offensive. Expansionary professional discourse features assertive language, and regular pronouncements about moves to occupy or capture new areas of expertise. A current example of expansionary discourse is taking place at the boundaries of PR, advertising, marketing and journalism over content marketing; a specialism designed to increase stakeholder engagement via social

media. The growth of content marketing has led PR and marketing to encroach on journalism by advising client-organisations to establish their own digital media centres, enabling companies with 'good stories to tell' to do their own storytelling (Lieb, 2017:1). The resulting 'brand journalism' is described as 'the first love child from the coupling of marketing and PR' (Lieb, 2017: 1). PR has further encroached on advertising to promote content marketing via 'earned' media, designed to succeed where banner ads, pop-ups, and native advertising have failed.

Content marketing involves more than journalistic skill in recognising news 'hooks'; it also encompasses visual storytelling via infographics, factual and emotive videos, photo essays and slideshows. Despite PR's long track-record in visual work, twentieth-century PR was best-defined by written tools of the trade: e.g. press releases, feature stories, speeches, in-house magazines and company reports. The bias toward PR 'wordsmithing' began to shift in the early-2000s, as platforms such as Myspace, Delicious, Flickr and Facebook created new opportunities for visual engagement, incorporating PR's existing storytelling skills. Social media also offered new opportunities for age-old PR skills in creating 'viral' publicity stunts. The shift toward visual skills is now evident in PR practice. In 2017, the top PR campaigns voted for by *PR Week UK* readers were all stunts involving visual experiences (PR Week, 2017). This has tested PR's boundaries with both advertising and digital marketing, which had positioned themselves as *the* professional specialists in visual storytelling.

PR's foray into content marketing is marginally less contentious than industry efforts to re-cast PR's role in creative campaign production. The advertising profession has always engendered a "cult of creativity", venerating the creative director's status and influence in advertising agencies (McStay, 2010: Nixon, 2003). Advertising's cult of creativity is

symbolised through the power of one event, the annual Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity, which anoints advertising's creative 'kings'. But advertising's role has come under threat in the twenty-first century. Globalisation, recession, and particularly, digital technologies have given new prominence to creativity as expertise. Today's clients valorise *creativity* more than ever. Creativity offers 'newness', the ability to break new boundaries and establish new genres (Nixon 2003). Creativity fuels the design of ever-new products, ever-more sophisticated campaigns and everlasting 'buzz' across digital and traditional platforms. The PR profession boldly trespassed advertising's creative boundary in response to changing client demands. Global PR firms, in particular, have used various industry soapboxes – speeches, trade magazine interviews and social media – to threaten to 'eat advertising's lunch' (Rogers, 2014). For the past six years, this particular expansionary discourse has been tracked via the annual 'Creativity in PR' survey published by *Holmes Report*, a PR trade publication (Sudhaman, 2017).

3.2. Protectionist discourses

The second significant area of boundary-work for the PR profession is *protectionist discourses*. Protectionist boundary-work is particularly interesting, since it encompasses vertical and horizontal boundaries. Vertically, protectionist discourse can take place between PR and other managerial departments within an organisation. One common protectionist discourse concerns PR's ability to defend against encroachment of its departmental boundaries (Lauzen, 1992). Intra-organisational encroachment refers to the process by which professionals from adjacent fields of marketing, IR, law, human resources, risk management, or engineering assume the organisation's senior PR role, forcing existing PR professionals into technical functions servicing other departments. Encroachment also occurs when PR

practitioners abandon the name 'public relations' from departments and job titles. While this is a long-standing research theme in PR scholarship, a focus on boundary-work broadens our understanding of encroachment as a discourse with material effects, rather than a benign re-branding of PR work. Internal boundaries within PR also exist at the level of professional associations, where protectionist boundary-work regularly takes place between so-called ethical, professionalised PR practitioners and whichever PR workers are deemed to lie outside textbook definitions of PR.

Horizontally, protectionist boundary-work may take place *between* professions with different societal status. Here, Sanders and Harrison (2008) observe that higher-status professionals may adopt silence as a form of discursive boundary-work, insofar as silence appears to express 'a taken-for-granted assumption of their own technical superiority' (Sanders & Harrison, 2008: 297). Alternatively, high-status professions may be forced to defend boundaries against incursion by emphasising the exclusiveness of their abstract knowledge, and by constructing the role of aspiring interlopers as 'technicians' or 'non-experts' (Abbott, 1988; Bucher et al., 2016).

PR's horizontal boundary-work with journalism is an important location for discourse analysis. A boundary-work perspective opens up journalism's protectionist discourses against PR. Journalism has always been a permeable occupation, with frequent knowledge-transfer from PR, and job-mobility into PR (Abbott, 1988). This transferability has intensified in the twenty-first century, deepening journalism's protectionist discourses. As professionals, journalists are often mythologised as 'fearless crusaders' in search of truth, a quest that rests on *impartiality* as a professional logic, lending journalism its air of authenticity and trustworthiness (Aldridge, 1998). However, journalism's perceived impartiality has been

sorely tested in social media arenas. On social media platforms, a 'journalist' can be anyone, operating from anywhere; while online journalism gains greater currency and shareability when it expresses *partisanship*, appealing to social media communities and 'filter bubbles'. Unlike traditional newsrooms, social media has no incentive to mask PR professionals' biased contribution to news-making, and may instead amplify and distort an organisation's measured PR response to reputational attacks. More recently, the rise of so-called 'fake news' in emotionally-charged media environments has intensified boundary disputes between PR and journalism. While journalists expose direct links between PR and 'fake news' production, the PR industry subverts these claims by advancing PR's professional skills as truth-telling antidote (Czarnecki, 2017).

3.3. Hybridising discourses

The third and final area of boundary-work examined here concerns fragmentation or *hybridisation discourses*. These discourses are more closely-associated with entrepreneurial professions such as PR, than with traditional professions such as engineering, medicine or law. Where traditional professions may practise monopolistic market closure, restrictive practices and self-regulation in their boundary-work, entrepreneurial professions see monopolistic behaviour as neither desirable nor achievable. Instead, new knowledge-intensive occupations are expected to succeed through innovation, entrepreneurship and active engagement with markets (Muzio et al., 2011). Examples of PR's boundary-work include fragmentation activity by PR sub-fields, attempting to carve out specialisms such as corporate and strategic communication. Similarly, PR continually tussles with human resource and management consultants for ownership over crisis communication work. Crisis communication, in turn, overlaps with fields such as risk management, disaster

communication and business continuity (Coombs, 2012). Laskin (2014) describes boundary-work within publicly-listed companies between PR and IR professionals, who tussle over financial versus communication skills. Laskin observes that in previous decades, IR tasks were assigned to publicists who approached the promotion of company shares as press agents engaged in 'one-way communication' (Laskin, 2010). Revised definitions of IR move this sub-discipline closer to the "effective two-way communication" ideal favoured by PR's professional bodies (Laskin, 2010: 7).

4. Analysing PR's field level discourses

I now combine the preceding theoretical discussion on boundary-work with certain methodological considerations for exploring boundary-work in professional discourses. The combined theoretical and methodological discussion is represented in the discourse analytical framework in *Figure 1*. My purpose is to develop a method for PR researchers to explore professional texts as sites of boundary-work, where different professions contest their boundaries with PR, or different groups *within* PR contest hierarchies or new specialisms. In developing the framework, my starting point was the five possible modes of enquiry available to discourse analysts – theoretical, descriptive, interpretive, comparative and critical modes of enquiry (Carbaugh, 2007). The aim of *deconstructing* professional boundary-work sits in the poststructural tradition, which lends itself to interpretive approaches (Wetherell, 2001), where researchers respond to questions about a phenomenon's significance (e.g. boundary expansion, protection, hybridisation), and active meanings in communication practices (e.g. new or existing professional expertise). That said, the discourse analyst's investigative process is also cyclical, making it possible to move through the interpretive mode, taking in deeper reflections about other modes of enquiry (Carbaugh, 2007).

Discourse analysis is not a new methodology in PR scholarship. To date, much of this research has examined PR activity itself as a form of discourse work, shaping and influencing societal and political events (e.g. Bhatia, 2006; Bourne, 2017; Motion & Leitch, 2007). More recently, studies have explored professional discourses surrounding PR's authority, capabilities and expertise (e.g. Caruana & Crane, 2008; Edwards & Pieczka, 2013; 2014; Evangelisti Allori & Garzone, 2011; Williams & Apperley, 2009). These studies all contribute to our understanding of PR's professional evolution, offering insights about the field that are less obvious at first glance. However, even more can be learned about PR, its identity and practices, from observing PR's boundary-work with related professions, including journalism, advertising, marketing, human resources and management consultancy. For this reason, my next stop is the area of scholarship known as professional discourse analysis (e.g. Bhatia, 2010; Gunnarsson, 2009; Wong, 2014). While I have incorporated some of the analytical techniques from this field, most professional discourse studies focus on micro-level discourses between *individuals* within organisations, whereas the framework offered below (See *Fig. 1*) is designed to deconstruct PR's professional discourses at the macro-level or field-level.
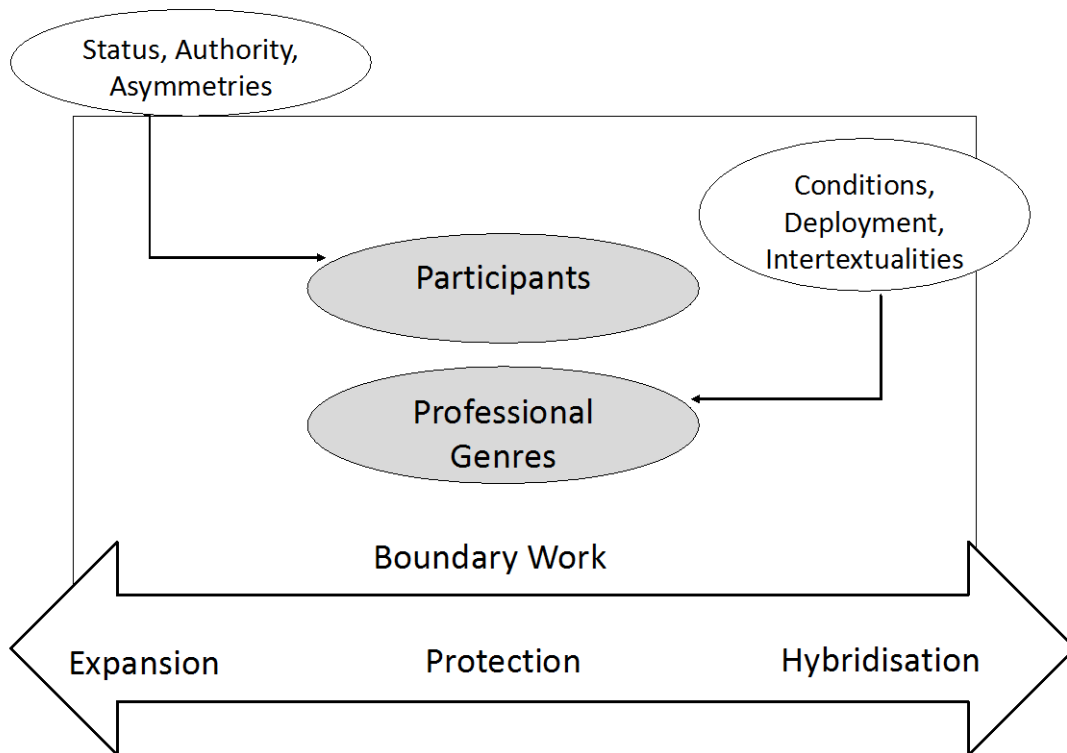
Fig.1. Field-level professional discourse analysis (Source: Author)

4.1. Participants: status, authority, asymmetries

The simplest way for discourse analysts to approach the framework is to start at the top of the

diagram, identifying the various participants in the professional discourse(s), with a view to

deconstructing participants' status, authority and asymmetries. Discursive participants should

include speakers (often multiple speakers) as well as audiences. Here, the researcher needs to

deconstruct the social structure of the various speakers in relation to each other, as well as in

relation to the intended audience or audiences for the selected text (Gunnarsson, 2009). In

some circumstances, both speaker(s) and audience can be regarded as part of a discourse

community, that is, participants with shared work activity, goals and beliefs, and ways of

communicating with each other (Paltridge, 2012). Paid-up members of one of PR's

professional associations could be considered a discourse community, while readers of *PR Week*, a trade publication, might be a more loosely-connected 'discourse network' (Paltridge, 2012).

4.2. Professional genres: conditions, deployment, intertextualities

The next step of the framework is to consider the professional genre. Genres are how people 'get things done' through their use of spoken, written and visual discourse. Many professional texts are produced through collective processes, involving meetings, discussions, comments and editing. These processes are just as important as actual writing, filming, printing or production (Gunnarson, 2009). Every genre occurs in a particular setting, is organised in a particular way, and has a distinctive communicative function (Paltridge, 2012). The way a profession uses language in a particular genre also depends on whether the text is written, spoken or image-based; as well as the social and cultural context in which the genre occurs. Researchers will need to ask themselves: What sort of genre does your text represent? What is the text's professional purpose? Is it a speech? If so, what do we need to know about speeches as discursive genre? Is it an industry survey? Is it a report for a particular purpose? Is it thought leadership – i.e. marketing the expertise of a particular group? Is it a corporate video to be shared via social media? Professional discursive data can often be found in texts deployed by groups or individuals purporting to represent the 'voice' of the PR profession. Data might include texts deployed by trade and professional associations, by global PR consultancies, and by PR trade magazines and websites (Paltridge, 2009).

Researchers will also need to consider carefully the external conditions which gave birth to the text. One of the strengths of field-level approaches to discourse, is the search for *context.*

Understanding why a professional text was deployed at a particular time comes through understanding the text's external conditions. However, contextual work is painstaking. For example, one might ask the question: 'How has the PR industry been faring financially at the time this text was deployed?' The answer may vary depending on the contextual source, and its date of publication. External context will go beyond the economic and financial, taking in technological, legal, political, societal or cultural factors (Gunnarsson, 2009). It is also worth bearing in mind that professional genres can change over time. For example, the interoffice memo – a once popular professional genre – was superseded by email and intranet messaging. Equally, the industry trade magazine is now more likely to be an online format, disseminated via email alert or shared on social media. Researchers should also consider whether the text being analysed spans several professional genres (Paltridge, 2009). For example, some industry reports combine quantitative surveys with qualitative commentary from the report's sponsor. Finally, researchers should be aware of intertextuality, where a *prior* text may have shaped the current text under analysis (Bhatia, 2010). Equally, the selected professional text may have led to a host of other texts, depending on the intensity of professional boundary-work underway, and the response from intended (and unintended) audiences.

5. **Working with Field-Level Textual Data**

There are many options available for collecting discourse analytical data on the PR profession, and on adjacent professions involved in boundary-work with PR. Meanwhile, everyday practitioner life involves deploying texts that simultaneously defend client-organisations, as well as the legitimacy of PR practices. Researchers are encouraged to begin by collecting available textual data, in order to determine which textual sources present the

best evidence of expansionary, protectionist or hybridising professional boundary-work. In regions or sectors where professional texts are sparsely available in the public domain, then researchers should consider how best to collect data which captures PR boundary-work in action. (See section 6.5.)

5.1. Thought leadership and industry reports

In large, well-resourced professional marketplaces, the most accessible professional genres often take the form of industry thought leadership and reports published by professional associations, think tanks and global firms. Thought leadership refers to proprietary research, white papers, industry speeches and articles, all published to 'showcase' expertise – in this case, the collective expertise of professionals. (See Bourne, 2015b). Industry reports, for example, are often produced to 'promote' a profession – to inform professionals and their clients about industry developments, offer solutions to industry problems, or promote industry skills in the face of encroachment from proximate fields. Thought leadership can set out industry positions across a few pages, while industry reports can be more extensive – up to 60 pages or more – particularly when sponsored by global firms. Industry reports are often highly-intertextual, combining statistical survey data, charts and infographics, qualitative interviews with technical experts, informed commentary from senior professionals, and possibly insights from third-party authorities. For instance, the UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) published a discussion paper in 2018, entitled 'Humans still needed: An analysis of skills and tools in public relations' (Valin, 2018). The paper communicates with two other professional texts: firstly, the CIPR's 70th anniversary publication, which is promoted throughout the paper; secondly, a doughnut chart adapted from the 'Global Body of Knowledge Project', sponsored by international PR trade body, the Global Alliance for

Public Relations and Communications Management (Global Alliance, 2014). The title of the CIPR paper appears self-explanatory. However, deconstructing this discursive genre through a boundary-work perspective reveals new understandings of PR's twenty-first century jurisdictional struggles. On the one hand, the report presents a jurisdictional battle between PR and marketing, as each profession claims expertise in employing Artificial Intelligence (AI) communication tools. But the report might also be read as a portent of future professional boundary-work between human and non-human entities, as AI becomes normalised across professional work.

5.2. Trade magazines

Trade magazines are another source of discursive data on professions. *PR Week* describes itself as 'the world's leading PR and comms publication', while *The Holmes Report* describes itself as 'the authoritative voice of the global public relations industry'. Edwards and Pieczka (2013) explore trade magazines' significance to PR's professional project. Trade coverage of occupational events, practitioners and practices circulates extensively amongst PR professionals, but also to members of adjacent fields such as advertising and marketing (especially where PR articles are re-posted to sister publications). Trade articles help to construct the PR profession and related fields, through "the representation of particular occupational jurisdictions, identities, practices and habitus" (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013: 5). Trade magazines also supply competitive information – intelligence on competitors' activities as well as information on how to perform better in the marketplace. For example, Hill and White (2000) outline trade magazines' contribution during the 1990s, providing PR professionals with information on how to use the Internet, the World Wide Web, and other online technologies. Trade publications can also provide a setting for broader analysis of

professional boundary-work in global contexts, such as Bardhan's (2013) sociocultural analysis of US trade publication, *The Public Relations Strategist,* as a setting for PR professionals' discourses of globalisation.

5.3. Social media platforms

Social media can produce a rich repository of discursive data, since social media platforms forge online communities where can professionals can discuss mutual interests and problems. Social media gains particular currency through instant information-generation and sharing around things that matter (Cardoso 2011). This makes social media a tricky medium for professionals, particularly on Twitter where there is little room for visual cues, nuance or explanation (Gilpin, 2011). A momentary lapse in judgment can lead to controversial online comments that reflect poorly on the entire profession. Consequently, professionals vary in their use of social media. Some stick closely to LinkedIn as the best milieu for professional discussion and personal branding. Others are comfortable including Twitter, Facebook or Instagram in the mix. For researchers, social media platforms are valuable for showcasing spontaneous inter-professional discussions and debates, reflecting boundary-work more candidly than other professional genres. Recent debates on Twitter, for example, include conversation threads unpicking the current relationship between PR and employee relations (Xifra & Grau, 2010). Social media is also useful for researching views of PR from 'the other side'. Twitter, in particular, frequently hosts sarcastic exchanges between journalists lamenting 'inept' PR contacts.

As discussed earlier, social media platforms, as part of the digital persuasion architecture, are also crucial sites of PR, advertising and marketing work. Every status update whether posted

or discarded, every messenger conversation, every place logged from, every photo uploaded becomes saleable data for advertising, marketing and PR (Tufekci, 2017).

'Engagement' is the governing rule of social media platforms, and the lifeblood of successful PR. On social media, engagement means virality. 'Fake news', angry claims and heart-warming stories are most effective – yet these viral techniques have brought PR, advertising and marketing alike into further disrepute. This makes social media platforms an essential location for field-level discourse analysis of PR and adjacent professions.

5.4. Visuals and visual artifacts

Visuals can and should be included in professional discourse analyses where possible, since visuals say so much about professional boundary-work. A range of theoretical approaches to visuals can be incorporated into field-level discourse analysis, including work on visual fluency of organisational spaces, places and visual artifacts (Yanow, 2006). Boundary-work by Edelman, the global PR firm, offers ample visual material for professional discourse analysis. Edelman has actively engaged in reinventing its professional boundaries, most recently announcing a shift in business model from PR to integrated 'communications marketing' (Edelman, 2017). Edelman's Hong Kong office used an office refurbishment to convey this boundary-work, visually representing the firm's encroachment on advertising and marketing turf. In videos posted on YouTube and through illustrated articles in trade magazines, Edelman Hong Kong used its 2013 office refurbishment to visually represent Edelman as a "perfect environment to get creative" (Fransen, 2017). Captioned video footage and photos portrayed Edelman Hong Kong as discursive text, visually representing "one big open space with no boundaries, designed for one big team that is unstoppable" (Fransen, 2017). Images of Edelman's office refurbishment featured plenty of bean bags, sofas, stools

and even a foosball table. Yanow (2006) describes all these objects, and the built-spaces they occupy, as artifacts of organisational work, and as central actors in communicating organisational meaning. Images of bean bags, sofas and open spaces replicate the conventional image of work spaces in advertising agencies. In this sense, bean bags and open spaces act as three-dimensional discursive texts, proffering visual fluency of Edelman's boundary-work. The right visual design enables Edelman's audience – current and prospective clients and employees – to process professional images and objects that say 'advertising and marketing' speedily and accurately (Winkielman, 2003 et al.).

5.5. Recorded conversations and interviews

Finally, one-to-one or group conversations with industry professionals are the most direct source of discursive data on professional boundary-work (e.g. Williams & Apperley, 2009). These can be scheduled interviews or focus groups, organised by the researcher. Alternatively, discursive data-gathering may involve ethnographic or participant observation at industry conferences and training seminars, or during workplace activity. Fagersten's (2015) study examines intranet exchanges between employees at an online marketing agency, following the creative director's decision to pitch to a tobacco company. Employees were divided between those who welcomed the new business pitch and those who vilified the tobacco industry altogether. Fagersten's study reveals boundary-work between creative professionals and other employees, as well as conflict between ethical discourses, PR and marketing discourses, where employees portrayed the new business pitch as a threat to the agency's reputation.

6. Limitations

Discourse analysis poses its own limitation as a research technique. It can be complex to learn, not helped by a confusing body of literature, with limited discussion of how discourse analysts actually conduct their analysis (Harper et al., 2008). Many researchers acquire discourse analytical skills through self-education in institutional settings where no formal discourse analytical teaching exists (Antaki et al., 2003). This makes the quality of studies highly variable. In addition to the limitations posed by the subjectivity of discourse analysis as a research technique, it is also difficult to offer a high degree of empirical or theoretical generalisability.

Further challenges include the search for pertinent texts for professional discourse analysis. Some professions are more opaque than others, while professions in small or less developed nations may not have resources to produce industry thought leadership and reports. Where this occurs, researchers will want to investigate the possibility of collecting textual data directly from professionals themselves via surveys, interviews, focus groups or participant observation. However, these latter approaches have resource implications for research teams. Inexperienced researchers can find amassing contextual material challenging, and may be inclined to skip or skimp on studying contextual information. Other typical shortcomings identified by Antaki et al. (2003) include under-analysis of textual findings, either through summary, taking sides, over-quotation or isolated quotation, or through simply 'spotting' textual features.

Beyond the specific limitations of discourse analysis as method, are the broader issues of researching professional boundary-work in the twenty-first century. Some scholars argue that a process of de-professionalisation is taking place in knowledge-based occupations, marking

the end of the 'golden age' of professions (Muzio et al., 2011). Pessimists might argue that boundary-work is questionable if there are no real professional boundaries to protect anymore. PR, for example, is already so fragmented along many fault-lines, that assigning 'boundaries' in an effort to capture boundary-work may eventually become too complex. Finally, it should be pointed out that not all professional struggles are discursive. For instance, sociologists of professions acknowledge that industry and workplace structures are also relevant and important factors in shaping professional projects (Muzio et al., 2011).

7. Conclusion

Furthering PR scholarship must include studies of PR's jurisdictions and its jurisdictional disputes (Abbott, 1988). This article has introduced into PR theory, a discourse analytical framework for deconstructing boundary-work between PR and adjacent professions. As Gunnarsson (2009:17) asserts, professionals "have not finished building their tower of Babel; construction is always in progress. They are constantly changing their language and discourse as they try to make themselves both well-known and unique". The methodological framework presented in this article can be applied in exploring different contestations in professional discourses: from PR's protectionist discourses within a single organisation, to expansion of PR's boundaries into advertising and marketing, to fragmentation of PR's boundaries to create new sub-disciplines.

The flexibilty and utility of field-level professional discourse analysis answers the call to dismantle silo thinking about PR activity, through a methodology designed to examine PR's intersections with other fields. The article makes a singular contribution to PR theory, as well as to wider literature on organisations and professions, where new accounts of professional

boundary-work are needed (Bucher et al., 2016). As method, field-level professional discourse analysis can contribute more mature perspectives of PR as a range of "activities and applications of various ethical hue", continuously overlapping with related activities such as advertising, marketing and other professions (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2005: 9). Field-level discourse methodology can also lend greater rigour to PR scholarship through meticulous attention to recent expansion, protectionism and hybridisation within the PR profession and adjacent fields. Moreover, amidst the 'wicked problems' of our time, methods which dismantle silos between PR and adjacent professions could not only examine shared professional concerns, such methods might even lead to shared interdisciplinary solutions.

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