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“There’s a cultural thing of invisibility”: emerging sites of struggle for local council public relations practitioners

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Abstract

Australian local councils must change entrenched aspects of organisational culture if they wish to become more responsive to public expectations about online engagement (Katz & Halpern, 2013). Whilst some Australian local councils are responding to this challenge by introducing a greater focus on social media and re-structuring the roles and functions in communication teams (Oliveira & Welch, 2013), little is known about the perceptions and experiences of staff during this process. In particular, little is known about the effects of change on workplace resistance amongst practitioners, particularly around issues relating to their time and the value attached to certain kinds labour. Drawing on an analysis of interview material conducted with an Australian local council in 2015, this article reports on the emerging sites of tension for public relations practitioners in one local council during its transition to greater online engagement. It concludes that more research is needed into the ways in which changing work practices impacts on the possibilities for resistance within female-dominated local government communication teams.

Keywords: public relations labour, social media, local councils, power relations

Introduction

Australians are increasingly engaged in online communication with the different levels of government, including local councils (Howard, 2012). However, research indicates that Australian local councils must change entrenched aspects of organisational culture if they wish to become more responsive to public expectations about online engagement (Katz & Halpern, 2013). Recent anecdotal evidence and industry reports suggest that some Australian local councils are responding to this challenge by re-structuring the roles and functions in communication teams (Oliveira & Welch, 2013). However there is little academic research into these organisational shifts or their implications for employees in public relations roles such as Communication as Media Officers.

Critical public relations theorists Holtzhausen and Voto take a critical view of the functionalist approaches to public relations work, as they inherently ‘privilege’ management discourses (Holtzhausen & Voto 2002: 58). They argue that public relations practitioners express ‘[r]esistance to power’ (2002:63) within organisations in various ways, and that these must be researched and understood. Bourdieu suggests that in order to understand the possibilities for resistance amongst a given group, researchers must first analyse the conditions under which ‘dispositions to resist’ are socially constituted (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 82). It is important to understand how public relations workers resist dominant narratives about the value of their labour and how changing employment conditions impact on resistance (Keating 2016 forthcoming). The available qualitative research with a focus on public relations practitioners rarely highlights the organisational conditions for their ‘resistance to power’. Case studies of work make it possible to identify emerging sites of struggle for public relations practitioners during this period of significant technological change. In examining one case study in detail, this article draws out critical themes for future research into ‘resistance to power’ amongst practitioners.

Drawing on interview material conducted with several Australian local councils in 2015, this article reports on some emerging tensions amongst public relations practitioners in a local council during its transition to greater online engagement. My analysis of interview data indicates that organisational narratives about skill, stakeholder engagement, and overtime can be seen as sites of struggle for those in public relations roles. Reflecting on this case study, I argue that more quantitative and qualitative research is needed to document the emerging sites of struggle for public relations practitioners during this period of technological and organisational change in the public sector. In the context of a predominantly young, female public relations workforce, it is important to document how shifting organisational conditions impact on practitioners’ ‘dispositions to resist’ the discourses of the powerful. One way of doing this is to contextualise management narratives which emphasise organisational commitment to ‘two-way communication’, ‘flexible work practices’ and ‘stakeholder engagement’ in relation to employee narratives about their struggles to maintain agency over work-life balance, skill recognition and career advancement. My paper concludes with a proposal for a more theorised research agenda which focusses on the emerging struggles and ‘dispositions to resist’ amongst women practitioners in the context of local council communication teams.

Local councils in the changing communication context

In recent years the Australian public has consistently turned to the internet as the preferred method of contact with government service providers (Australian Government Management Information Office, 2011). Local councils are changing their one-way information-giving practices with media and community to keep up with the increased demand for up-to-date online news, and to increase public accountability with groups that scrutinise and share opinions about council performance. As noted by Katz and Halpen:

When citizens...contrast their data on pothole complaints with data on pothole repairs generated by the government, such capabilities expose authorities’ behaviour to citizens’ scrutiny, enabling citizens to reduce information asymmetries and uncovering inefficiencies, thus changing the power relationship between the parts. (2013, p. 3)

This shift has implications for all professional teams working in a local council. Communication is now amongst the most important ‘soft’ skills that all employers look for in employees (Robles, 2012) and digital literacies are now widely considered a basic requirement for employees in all professions (European Commission, 2015; Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2015, p. 133). In Australia, local councils are responsible for the provision and co-ordination of around 80 per cent of community facilities and services, such as health, child care and aged care support services, as well as parks and gardens, recreation and cultural facilities (McShane, 2006). Accordingly professional teams across council disseminate information to residents about these services, whilst designated teams are in place to manage negative publicity about local social and political issues, promote events and manage media interest in infrastructure and other developments.

In seeking to become more responsive to their communities, local councils have sought organisation-wide changes to achieve ‘a greater orientation towards change, flexibility, entrepreneurialism, and outcomes’ (Parker & Bradley, 2000). Increasingly, managers in local councils seek employees who are competent at using online communication and social media platforms with internal and external stakeholders (Howard, 2012, p. 20). Despite this, Omar, Stockdale, and Scheepers (2014) recently found that the majority of Australian local councils still deploy social media in ad hoc ways and “with no clear aim to interact with the citizens” (p. 673). Their findings echo earlier research concluding that much of the contact between local governments and citizens online is still related to users seeking information rather than engaging with council around issues (Gauld, Goldfinch, & Horsburgh, 2010).

Online communication has introduced challenges for professional communication and public relations employees, including the need to adapt to changing organisational cultures. James (2007) accurately conjectured nearly a decade ago that social media would change the broad landscape for Australian public relations professionals to such a degree that they would require enhanced skills for cross media delivery, web publishing, software application and search engine optimisation. Whilst skills associated with social media usage were regarded until recently as a low priority for many public relations practitioners in Australia (de Bussy & Wolf, 2009), Berger and Meng (2014) note that this has

changed significantly, and that the most important issues facing public relations practitioners globally are now related to the management of social media as well as the speed and volume of online communication. A range of management responses to the online environment have been documented, some of which have fundamentally changed the employment context for public relations practitioners. Berger and Meng (2014) found that:

the digital revolution was a game changer that touched numerous aspects of [managers’] daily practice. These included hiring new employees with relevant skill sets, the structure of the communication function, strategic and tactical plans and choices, crisis planning and response, employee training programs, meeting venues, flexible work programs, new platforms for sharing best practices, environmental scanning, and the round-the-clock need to converse with external groups and individuals. (p. 298)

In recent research in four local councils in the state of Victoria, Omar et al. (2014) found that whilst staff members believe social media has the potential to increase their capacity to serve the public, the workload associated with social media adoption is often perceived by employees to be a significant problem. They found that this perception was linked to the level of ‘formality’ in how social media-related work is recognised, assigned and managed in local councils. They also found that the low profile of work associated with social media activities can lead to escalating workloads and inadequate designation of resources for responding to the public. Omar et al. (2014) note:

There were several references to the time and effort involved in maintaining social media sites in an already “stretched work day.”... The workload is subsumed into existing workloads with little evidence of responsibilities being formally assigned. Any success in attracting users to the social media sites increases the workload of the employees and the fast pace of change adds to the problem of the personnel concerned. (p. 672)

Investigating the impacts of change on equity and diversity

New work practices designed to accommodate the demands of the online communication environment may have uneven effects on professional communication and public relations employees, depending on a range of identity and organisational factors. Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, and Moreno (2014) found that almost half the communication professionals in their research reported they work at least 25% more than their formally contracted hours. They found that professionals at both ends of the hierarchy are most likely to work hours significantly beyond the standard work contract; that is the youngest professionals in the early years of their careers and those in most senior positions (Zerfass et al., 2014, p.19). Whilst women were more likely than men to work within their contracted hours, this was not true for women in senior

management roles, who were equally prone to working additional hours. The reasons for this finding are unclear however, and Zerfass et al. (2014) note that social factors operating within and beyond the workplace need to be considered in further research. The relationship between work hours, organisational culture and gender equity in career advancement remains under-researched in the field of public relations and professional communication. Zerfass et al. (2014) argue that:

[W]omen are either more efficient and better at managing their work and demands within the contract of employment, or alternatively ... they are not progressing to the senior levels because they are not able to put in the extra time needed. (p. 19)

There have been numerous studies which show that professional communication and public relations work is highly gender segregated (Daymon & Demetrious, 2014). In Australia, current statistics indicate that women comprise two thirds of the 20,000 or so public relations employees. However, men in public relations jobs are twice as likely to work full-time, while an estimated 15.3% of the public relations workforce is comprised of part-time women workers (Department of Employment, 2012). In 2010, 73% of the membership of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) was made up of women (Salt & Shein, 2012, p. 10), with corporate analysts Salt & Shein in 2012 referring to PR as a ‘pink ghetto’ (p. 22). This implies that whilst women may occupy the majority of PR jobs, the positions they occupy are rarely close to the seat of power.

Whilst not always ‘low paid’, US research indicates that professional communication and public relations roles are commonly perceived by practitioners to be ‘service’ oriented, with embedded requirements to be constantly available to the employer or the client (Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008). Despite this, research also indicates that practitioners are often ‘gender blind’ to broader social, cultural and institutional contributors to work-life stressors, and perceive that women are individually responsible for creating an effective balance (Aldoory et al., 2008). Aldoory et al. (2008) propose that a ‘work-personal continuum’ is constantly being navigated by public relations practitioners, who measure their place on the continuum through factors such as:

societal pressure; contradictions between organizational policies and culture; the unpredictable nature of work; technology usage; professional identity; parenthood; and time shifting processes that favor work. (p. 14)

Shen and Jiang (2013) found that in the United States, public relations practitioner perceptions of ‘work-life conflict’ vary markedly in relation to diverse intersecting factors such as age, professional specialisation and family/dependent primary care responsibilities. They reported that across all categories, practitioners aged in their forties and fifties and with primary care responsibilities at home struggled to maintain clear work-life boundaries. They were also most vulnerable to leaving their employment due to increased stress

relating to client expectations of constant social media engagement. Such research indicates a great need for research which documents the changing possibilities for ‘resistance’ to power amongst those employed in the public relations profession.

Studies outside the profession indicate that job seniority can also play an important role in worker experiences of work-life conflict. In a study of online communication and work-life conflict with university employees, Boswell and Olson-Buchanan (2007) found that ‘lower level’ staff used online communication platforms to ‘stay on top of their work or to prevent major work problems from developing’ (p. 604), without necessarily perceiving this as bringing their work into conflict with other areas of their lives. However, those in team leader and managerial roles reported that online communication exacerbated stress and work-life conflict. Workplace culture has been found to contribute significantly to employee experiences of work-life conflict (Clarke, 2000).

It is not clear how organisational adaptations to the online environment contribute to public relations practitioner experiences of agency or the possibilities for resistance in the workplace. In mapping out the possibilities for such a research agenda, I conducted a range of interviews with staff in different organisations within the local government sector, in order to see how management and practitioner level staff described shifts in the labour processes involved in communication work. My analysis revealed several sites of discursive struggle which are occurring about the role and function of public relations, practitioner skills and practitioner agency over work-life balance under new work conditions. The findings of this study raise questions in relation to the potential gender differences between practitioners in relation to these sites of struggle.

Research methodology

In 2015 I conducted one-to-one interviews with professional communication and public relations staff employed in three Melbourne-based local governments. The organisations were chosen because they were large organisations, each employing between 350 and 800 staff, and each with an in-house communication and public relations team, comprised of five to ten employees. Interviewees included senior directors and managers, team leaders, and communication officers responsible for a range of social media and traditional media activities, corporate communication, public relations and web content management functions. One hour face-to-face interviews explored how the online communication environment had influenced changes in the structuring and the performance of communication work and the extent to which communication team members experience agency over ‘work–life’ boundaries and other aspects of their work. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for themes related to the perceived changes in roles, activities, skills and work hours of communication and media employees. Whilst the majority of communication team members in all three councils were women, the team leaders and senior managers responsible for the team were all men. Despite numerous efforts over three months to interview women in local government communication roles, I was only given access to male team leaders and unit managers. The reasons given for this were always to do with low time availability.

The next section analyses data collected from employees in one council. This council was well suited for a case study analysis, as it was the only one which provided researcher access to two employees in the communication team, the senior manager of the Communication Unit and the Director of Corporate

Services. The other four members of the team (all female) were unavailable to be interviewed at any time during the three month research period due to time limitations created by intense work pressure on team members during the absence of a key member on maternity leave, and part-time employment arrangements amongst the others. Because of this limitation, it was not possible to ascertain the perceptions of women team members in relation to the changing communication roles at the council. Nonetheless, shifts in communication work is framed by those interviewed in ways that raise important issues about the altered conditions for resistance amongst communication practitioners. It is therefore crucial that future research is conducted into women’s subjective responses to these conditions within local government workplaces.

In the following section I discuss data collected from one-to-one interviews with two senior managers, the team co-ordinator of the Communication and Media team, and the Online Communication Officer in this local council. The four interviewees were each asked to talk about the impact of online communication in the recent restructuring of the communication team and to define the kinds of new communication activities undertaken by the council. Interviewees were asked about the impact of change on both the skills required for communication work, and the organisational culture around the organisation of work time.

Online communication and change in one local council

Reframing the city: engagement and advocacy as the new drivers

In 2013 the Communication and Media team at the council was at the centre of a restructure designed in response to the changing strategic priorities of the organisation. The increasingly middle-class local community was becoming vocal about issues such as traffic congestion, noise pollution and truck access. The council wanted to reposition itself as proactive on community engagement and policy advocacy relating to these issues, whilst building the reputation of the area as vibrant and attractive.

A Unit Manager had been brought in by the council to oversee the recently restructured ‘Strategic Communications, Marketing and Advocacy’ unit. He explained that the Communication and Media team had to work together with him on advocacy strategies to address council’s ‘key reputational concerns’, and also with the Marketing team to promote festivals as ‘one of the antidotes to some of the negative perceptions’. Together the three functions within the team were meant to ‘reframe’ the city. The strategic profile of the Communication and Media team had shifted significantly and he noted that it’s work ‘wasn’t just a function of governance any longer’.

The newly configured unit included the six members of the Communication and Media team as well as the ‘Major Events’, ‘Activation’ and ‘Economic Development’ teams. These teams maintained their separation but were to collaborate on high profile campaigns and events. An external company was contracted to establish an online community consultation process to stimulate two-way discussions with community about policy advocacy issues.

The Unit Manager envisaged that the new unit configuration would facilitate a new type of media and community engagement, with a focus on building and marketing the ‘story’ about council:

a more proactive approach to marketing the council and owning the story to get out of the reactive responding to peoples information requests, and being at the hands of what the media wanted to write about council. (Unit Manager, 2015)

This was a significant departure from the council’s traditional corporate communication approach, and placed a greater emphasis on public relations:

Advocacy is a new emerging focus, which requires close linkages with media, public relations and community communication types of roles. It was hoped this team restructure would support the move from more kind of traditional local government media management, which is often responding to questions, to supporting the CEO to proactively advocate for issues which are important to the city. (Unit Manager, 2015)

Just prior to the interviews in 2015, the team was restructured again. The Director of Corporate Services explained that this time the resulting ‘Communications and Engagement’ team was to focus on “how we engage with our community” (Director of Corporate Services, 2015). The name change marked a growing organisational emphasis on two-way engagement with external stakeholders:

Whether its political advocacy around issues, or advocacy around funding or partnerships, engagement is a huge function of council now. The name change also reflects a stronger emphasis on social media as part of the council’s commitment to two-way communication. (Director of Corporate Services, 2015)

Shifting perceptions and expectations of public relations work

The Unit Manager commented that the most recent team restructure reflected a broader trend in local government, where event marketing and community engagement activities were converging more closely with traditional communication and media activities under a public relations umbrella:

The standard thing now is the tying together of community engagement functions. Within government organisations these

are now being co-located [with] public relations broadly. (Unit Manager, 2015)

The extent to which two-way interaction with the community can be facilitated through such changes is not clear. Throughout both restructures, the Communication and Media team consisted of five Communication Officers who occupied 3.8 EFT positions and one full-time Team Leader reporting to the unit manager. The team was responsible for largely one-way communication activities including website management, corporate publications, city marketing, internal communication, and speech writing. Aside from the Team Leader and Online Communication Officer, all the Communication Officers in the team were women. The Unit Manager perceived that good family leave arrangements allowed for employee flexibility and significant movement in and out of the team:

Most of the time I’ve been there, there’s been stand-ins and temporaries and people coming back from maternity leave, so whilst there’s a backbone of permanent positions, the norm in a way is to have some casuals filling some positions. (Unit Manager, 2015)

The Team Leader had occupied the same full-time role for over five years. Previously employed in the private sector, he perceived communication work at the council as less ‘reactive’, with less focus on what he described as ‘traditional’ public relations:

The PR function in the corporate sector is more concerned with reputation management. It’s much more a reactive – focussed on protecting the organisations image, where incoming media queries were usually crisis and issues. Whereas in the council, there is more emphasis on corporate communication. (Team Leader, 2015)

Whilst social media and blogging activities had gradually been added to the team’s ongoing corporate communication activities, the team maintained a focus on both internal and external stakeholders. However, the Team Leader explained that the internal stakeholders across the organisation were less aware of the team’s increasingly outward facing role:

I [still] deal with incoming media requests. I’m writing for media or responding to media and pitching in with writing speeches. I’m also forward planning with where we should be. With social media coming in, we are starting to look a lot more at that and blogging. Certainly in the last five and a half years - well before there was no social media here. It’s interesting. We’re

seen internally as being an internal service unit but in fact we work with a lot of external people as well... (Team Leader, 2015)

Whilst high level management narratives emphasised the importance of two-way engagement with external stakeholders, the Team Leader reflected that one-way communication activities continued to dominate the team’s work.

Despite this, his role increasingly required a constant negotiation between the diverse needs of external and internal stakeholders:

There are state government departments we deal with constantly about projects they’re doing in our local area. Sometimes they ask for our help in terms of passing their messages on to residents. The important thing to us is to get the story out, not to have a two-way dialogue about it. The media is a significant external stakeholder, as are residents but we don’t have a two-way dialogue. (Team Leader, 2015)

While ‘communication’, ‘media’ and ‘engagement’ employees are now co-located, the council’s ‘community consultation’ activities are targeted and outsourced to private firms. Indeed the team leader was wary of the council building community expectations about greater online engagement:

We’re doing ok moving across, but the community expectation is higher than our capacity to deliver. I mean they tweet and they want their answer in 30 seconds but no government agency is set up to do that! ... I guess the danger of course is that you raise expectations with twitter followers that you are going to be on there 24/7 answering questions immediately. We don’t have resources to conduct a two-way conversation with people. (Team Leader, 2015)

By contrast, the Director of Corporate Services portrayed the restructuring of the Communication and Engagement team as a crucial step in increasing its ability to provide rapid responses to residents:

Residents want responses, they don’t want to wait 2 weeks and they want responses now and we have to get information out to them quickly. (Director of Communication, 2015)

Internal systems did not seem to be in place in the council to facilitate greater social media activity. The Online Communication Officer explained that whilst social media work is undertaken on an ad hoc basis by unofficial ‘media officers’ in teams across council, there are no formal processes or resource allocation in place for this work:

That should be the role of someone in the communications and media team, to have an eye on all of that, but I’d have to work double the hours to do that! So the way it works, we just let them do whatever they want and trust that they’re doing the right thing. (Online Communication Officer, 2015)

What are the skills and aptitudes for public relations work?

The Online Communication officer explained that the team considered the community as their most important stakeholder. His obvious pride in resourcing residents gave him a strong sense of motivation and reward:

The people in the community are who we are working for. I view my role as feeding them information about how to make their lives better. I’m kind of the pivotal point! (Online Communication Officer, 2015)

Writing skills, strategic thinking and team-work were seen by the two team members as the core skills still required of the team, as well as an ability to work together to respond to fluctuating and diverse demands from internal and external stakeholders The team leader explains:

There are peaks and troughs. For example this week there were two speeches for the team and last week we had twenty. The ‘Online Communications Officer’ – if it gets really busy he’ll pitch in help with other things. I’ve got a ‘Corporate Communications Officer’ who does media as well. So no one does one thing, performing a discrete role. Everyone will help out, but someone has the main responsibility for different tasks. (Team Leader, 2015)

The Unit Manager emphasised that whilst communication work is performed by employees in ‘hybrid roles’ across council, council teams also have access to expert professional advice from the communication team:

There are hundreds of business streams in a typical local government, all of whom want to promote their service, their specific activities or just raise awareness of what they’re doing. The team acts in an advisory role to help others to prepare their brochures, flyers, their advertising. (Unit Manager, 2015)

The move to greater use of online communication was recognised as one of the most significant shifts impacting on the communication and media team in the council. The Unit Manager noted the very recent shift in this direction:

The biggest (change) is the huge shift towards digital. I guess it’s the same everywhere but social media is becoming far more important. (Unit Manager, 2015)

Rather than demanding more specialised technical skills and qualifications, however, the managers considered that this organisational shift required communication staff to have a greater ‘generalist’ aptitudes. This consisted of a willingness and capacity to contribute seamlessly across a range of communication, media and marketing activities and to exercise professional skill and judgement within those activities. The Director of Corporate Communication said:

Initially we hired someone outside to do social media and now it’s becoming embedded in everyday roles, so we’re not seeing that as a separate function. It’s becoming more integrated with everything. They’re a generalist communications specialist – that’s probably what I would call them, so they might have been a journalist, they may have done a communications degree, they may have done a marketing degree. (Director of Corporate Services, 2015)

The Online Communication Officer identified both broad and specific skills in his assessment of the requirements of team members:

I think to be able to interpret your audience is good, and that’s the first step. Then you need the skills to be able to put that into place...writing, listening, interpreting. A well-rounded knowledge of how society works and how the world works. And the ability to identify what’s a strong message. (Online Communication Officer, 2015)

The Communication Team Co-ordinator elaborated that successful team members had to have an underlying skill at understanding the ‘political’ context in which local council was crafting its messages. He said:

It’s the comms skills that determine whether they’re successful. Well you can teach someone to use Facebook but you can’t teach someone to have the political nous - the antennae! (Communication Team Co-ordinator, 2015)

Commenting on recent contextual changes, the Team Leader noted the need for the team to manage increasing fragmentation and intensity, in response to the organisational focus on reputation building and proactive story telling in the mercurial online environment. The day-to-day work of team members was increasingly preoccupied with repetitive, detailed tasks and work prioritisation. The Team Leader described an increasing time spent scanning and responding to online comments, re-crafting written content for multiple platforms and managing multiple sign-off arrangements with internal stakeholders:

When I come in in the morning I have to look at what’s happened on Facebook and what are people saying about us. If people are saying nasty things on our site we have to get it down. That was something I never had to worry about 5 years ago...you know, doing six things instead of one. Knowing how to write for different mediums is also very important. I mean social media is such a short snappy medium, it’s about really getting good at condensing it down and making it interesting...The theory goes it gives you time for other things, but we’re spending a lot of time on getting approvals through the organisation so that’s where the time goes... If there is a blog post [going out] about a planning project...the director of Planning has final sign off on that and then it goes to the Mayor. (Team leader, 2015)

The Team Leader believed that many of the new required activities and ways of working were not visible to management, and so the detailed skill and time associated with them were not recognised or rewarded. He reflected:

I think they assume that the work is just gonna happen instantly, without realising it takes a long time to craft words. You know a speech might take a while to write and a blog post is just as hard to write as a media release. It can be shorter but it still takes just as long. The way we write has become multi-faceted, and that doesn’t mean that magically everything can get done in the same amount of time. (Team leader, 2015)

‘They assume it’s getting done between 9-5pm’

The Director of Corporate Communication was proud of the council’s flexible, family friendly hours, acknowledging that most of the communication team members had family responsibilities. She maintains that whilst the volume of work needed to be ‘managed’, overtime is still rarely expected of the team despite the changing focus on online engagement:

They are on a 38-hour week. Yes we do expect some flexibility and we have some occasional evening work. I mean we could have them working seven days a week because the volume of work is huge, so it’s a matter of managing that. But generally we’ve got quite a few people with young children in that unit. (Director of Corporate Communication, 2015)

By contrast, the Team Leader explained that some members of the Communication Team experienced a higher degree of conflict about overtime than employees at the same level in other teams.

We have longer hours than other units, and it’s something that for myself and my family’s sake I try to pull back on. In media and comms you’re dealing with daily and weekly deadlines. A journalist needs something to go in the paper by this date, so if a media release doesn’t go out at the right date you don’t have the right lead time. (Team leader, 2015)

The Team Leader perceived that overtime in his team was largely invisible to senior management, because of organisational ‘norms’ that lower level staff did not work regular overtime. The increasing volume of individual outputs and sign-offs associated with communication work resulted in a clash between the organisational norms expressed by senior managers and his professional sense of integrity. The Team Leader noted that the other full-time members of his team had become frustrated with the lack of recognition of overtime and had recently stopped doing it due to their family commitments. He was concerned that if deadlines were not met, this would bring negative attention onto the team from others across the organisation. The lack of management recognition of this dilemma led him to experience an internal conflict about his professional expectations of himself. He felt that private refusal to work late as the only available form of employee resistance.

I can see things were getting done before that aren’t getting done now - or not to the previously high standards. I think there is a sense of professional dedication driving me, cos I don’t want to leave things undone. But there are people on the team getting frustrated that there was a lot of work being done out-of-hours and no financial or other recognition for it. If there’s a lot of competing priorities with lots of people saying “You have to get this done” unfortunately when it comes to it, people work without getting paid after hours. It’s unstructured, that’s the thing. No one is saying “You must stay back and do this”. In the past it’s been me and other people. At the moment, though, because other people’s lives don’t allow for it, it’s mostly me! It’s that dilemma of - if it doesn’t get done, there’ll be a consequence for us, as in “how come this hasn’t been finished?”...um...but there isn’t ... it’s not an expectation. (Team leader, 2015)

The Team Leader explains that his team had already overtly and collectively resisted social media monitoring work outside of work hours, on the grounds that ‘flexibility’ would not ever work in the employees favour in the council work context:

Previously, with social media monitoring, we took a view unless they were going to roster us on and pay us to do it, we weren’t going to monitor it after hours. There is just a volume of work, so it’s not as if there’s a peak time and then a trough where we can catch up. The organisation will say ‘I’ll give you this new task to do’ but there’s no sense that it’s costing someone 10 hours a week. It’s like ‘There’s no problem, the works just getting done’. They assume it’s getting done between 9-5pm. (Team leader, 2015)

Part of his dilemma involved the sense that hard work, dedication and overtime would probably not advance his career at council, as it would not be noticed:

In the corporate sector your hard work is kind of the key to moving up. Like, if you work hard, people do notice you working hard. Here I think there’s a cultural thing of invisibility. There’s an assumption that everyone’s working 9-5 and the work’s just getting done. I don’t think there’s even a realisation that some people might be working harder, hoping to go up the ladder or get something out of it. (Team leader, 2015)

Discussion and Conclusion

As Hotzhausen and Voto (2002) suggest, it is vital to investigate organisational narratives which counter those of management voices and which allow for a more nuanced understanding of workplace change for communication professionals. Whilst managerial staff in this case study emphasised a growing organisational focus on responsiveness to external stakeholders and proactive reputation building, the practical effects of these discursive shifts at the level of the team were somewhat surprising.

The two recent restructures in this council were implemented as part of the management’s strategic reconceptualising of public relations and corporate communication work, in which a growing convergence was anticipated between distinct corporate communication and community engagement activities. However, employee narratives indicated that ‘traditional’ written content and management of internal relationships continued to dominate the work of the team. This had significant implications for the ways in which public relations work is being re-framed, which in turn impacted on the visibility of significant elements of their ongoing labour. For instance, whilst management narratives emphasised the need for employees to bring more ‘generalist’ skills, employees articulated the need for team members to be adept at writing increasingly diverse texts and to manage a growing number of deadlines and internal relationships. The council’s relatively recent engagement with online communication platforms had also resulted in a proliferation of additional work activities for the team leader in relation to written outputs, managing internal approval processes and prioritising work-flow for the team. For the team leader this required significant time management skills. For him and the other full time employees in his team, the increasing amount of internal negotiation had also contributed to the ‘stretched working day’ which has been observed in previous studies (Omar et al., 2014, p. 672). Employees responsible for written content, media management and other external stakeholder engagement were required to manage a complex array of internal relationships and sign-off processes in the absence of additional resources. However, the skill and time implications of this change and the intensification of work for public relations employees were not at all evident in management narratives. This disjunct between management and team member discourses on change produced new tensions for some employees in the workplace, particularly in relation to work-life balance. It appeared to be difficult for team members to overtly resist unpaid overtime, in a context where management did not recognise it as a by product of workplace change. Whilst previously, the team had collectively resisted the introduction of new work practices such as out-of-hours monitoring of social media, the process of work fragmentation and intensification had created conditions in which it was not easy for the team to mobilise collectively. Unable to continue giving additional time to meet deadlines, and frustrated by the lack of visibility of the overtime they performed, it appeared that full time team members were instead making subjective, individual choices to prioritise work-life balance, often at the expense of job satisfaction. Such private acts of resistance appear to take place in the context where the previous standards team members sought to uphold seemed to be no longer visible to management or valued by the organisation.

Recent evidence suggests that Australians find it difficult to reconcile the demands of paid employment with domestic and care commitments outside of work. Women with primary care of children or elderly parents comprise around 40% of Australian workers and a 2014 national report on work and life shows that those employed in the female dominated ‘information media and telecommunications’ sector experience the second highest level of work-life ‘interference’ (Skinner & Pocock, 2014). Despite this, there is little focused

research which documents how organisational shifts may be impacting on work-life balance and career advancement in the female-dominated public relations field.

Across the state of Victoria, women employed in local councils comprise a particularly high proportion of total staff (61%) although, like elsewhere in Australia, there is a strongly gendered division of labour, with men predominating in senior management, engineering and planning roles, and women predominating in communication, administration, health and education and other service roles (Hastings, Ryan, Gibbs, and Lawrie, 2015). The general profile of professional communication teams in Victorian local councils is young, part-time and female. Nearly three quarters of those employed in designated public relations, event organising and marketing roles are female and more than half are employed on a part-time basis (Hastings, Ryan, Gibbs, and Lawrie, 2015, pp. 9-18). In this context it is important to understand how online communication and social media work in Victorian local councils may be interacting with organisational culture, work-life balance and career opportunities from the perspective of practitioners.

It is unclear how predictions of ‘unprecedented work–life organisational culture shifts’ (Flood, 2015, p. 4) are experienced by young women in lower level professional communication roles in Australian local councils, particularly as persistent gender disparities in career advancement are evident within this context. There is also little in the public relations or organisational communication literature which specifically deals with experiences of ‘resistance’ amongst professional communication and public relations employees. It is important for future research to address this gap, particularly in the public sector, where the overwhelming majority of such employees are women who occupy part-time contracts. It is especially relevant to understand the experiences of this group of workers during a period in which many public sector organisations are re-organising scant resources within communication and media teams.

Fitch, James and Motion (2015) have drawn on feminist literature to highlight how women’s overt acts of resistance such as ‘talking back’ in academic, social media and journalistic spaces, can attract punitive responses from those in dominant positions. Perhaps less understood are the private acts of resistance taking place within organisations, and the cost involved in terms of job satisfaction and career progression. Given the predominance of women in the public relations field, it is important to research the changing conditions in organisations, and the ways in which these may be constituting particular dispositions to resist. The fragmentation and intensification of work involved in online engagement has potential implications on work-life conflict, job satisfaction and career progression for employees in public relations roles in local councils. However there remains a scarcity of empirical or theoretical research into collective and private acts resistance possible amongst this group. This article suggests that management narratives about two way online engagement, role convergence and work-life balance in public relations work need to be interrogated more critically. Further research with public relations practitioners might investigate emerging sites of struggle evident in their narratives of work-life balance, job satisfaction and opportunities for career progression.

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