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Exploring the Role of Public Relations as a Cultural Intermediary Occupation

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Abstract
This article sets out an argument for paying greater sociological attention to the public relations industry as an important mechanism through which society and culture are formed. It offers a theoretical and empirical exploration of public relations practice which begins to address this lacuna, using a Bourdieuan framework. After introducing the public relations industry and cultural intermediation, arguments are made for the centrality of discursive struggle in Bourdieu’s work, drawing on other theorists as necessary to make explicit the logic that puts language and discourse at the centre of the struggle for symbolic power. This clarifies the importance of public relations as an object of sociological analysis. Bourdieu’s conception of practice is then reflected on and applied to public relations, before the findings from an exploratory case study are considered. The article concludes by reviewing implications for future theoretical and empirical work in this area.

Keywords
Bourdieu, cultural intermediaries, discourse, fields, professional communications, public relations, symbolic power

Introduction
Public relations is a significant industry in the UK, conservatively estimated to employ 50,000 people and used across the private, not-for-profit and public sectors (Centre for Economics and Business Research Ltd., 2005). Public relations work encompasses a wide range of below-the-line communications strategies and tactics including media relations, external stakeholder communications, internal communications, public affairs and lobbying. It is closely linked to the advertising, marketing and media industries,

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promoting discourses about products, services, organizations, brands and policies in order to generate material changes in audience behaviour, attitudes or values.

In this article I argue that there is scholarly value in recognizing public relations as a form of cultural intermediary work. The notion of cultural intermediaries is derived from Bourdieu’s work and has been defined in terms of their roles as the ‘shapers of taste and the inculcators of new consumerist dispositions’ (Nixon and du Gay, 2002: 497). In Bourdieuan terms, public relations promotes a particular type of habitus – what it is to be a ‘rock music fan’, a ‘consumer’, a ‘citizen’, for example – by presenting specific practices and their underlying assumptions as better, more attractive, more logical, more responsible, or more appropriate than others. In the cultural industries literature, a number of scholars have argued for recognition of the cultural effects of industries, like public relations, traditionally regarded as purely commercial (Mato, 2009; McFall, 2002; Negus, 2006). Advertising has received attention in this respect (McFall, 2004; Nixon, 2003) but public relations has not, perhaps because it takes place ‘behind the scenes’, most notably as engagement with journalists to generate media coverage. Arguably, this means its effects on tastes and dispositions are mediated rather than direct, which makes the claim to a cultural intermediary role less clear-cut.

Nonetheless, in recent years the decline in influence of traditional media and the increasing availability of channels that allow unmediated, interactive communication with audiences have extended the portfolio of tools available to practitioners; media work now constitutes a smaller proportion of practice, while web-based communications are growing (Wright and Hinson, 2008). Moreover, competitive pressures on resource-poor media organizations mean that journalists nowadays are more likely to accept and use public relations materials, often unedited, in their copy, giving PR practitioners the opportunity to lead, rather than merely respond to, the media agenda (Davies, 2008, Davis, 2000, McChesney, 1999). Correspondingly, the impact of public relations on the cultural and social environment, and its potential to shape tastes and dispositions, is more direct, significant and visible than ever before and merits attention.

I begin by reviewing briefly the history of public relations in the UK and its implications for this discussion. I then consider the specific nature of public relations as a cultural intermediary. Because it is grounded in discursive struggle and misrecognition, I suggest that public relations constitutes a form of symbolically violent cultural intermediation, ultimately designed to generate symbolic power for vested interests. Given recent calls to examine the material practices of cultural intermediaries (Nixon and du Gay, 2002), the rest of the article addresses the following research question: how does this form of cultural intermediation operate in micro-contexts? To answer this question, I draw on Bourdieuan understandings of practice to shape my analysis of public relations’ cultural intermediation, based on a three-month case study investigation of a particular micro-context: the Corporate Affairs department in a large, UK-based passenger transport operator, ‘Roule’. I conclude by considering the implications of the findings for the study of public relations as a form of cultural intermediary work, and for future theoretical and empirical investigations of cultural intermediary practice more generally.
Public Relations: A Potted History

The modern form of public relations in the UK emerged during the 19th and early 20th centuries as part of efforts to expand and sustain the British Empire. Political and trading structures were the initial drivers of formalized public relations; as the Empire waned, promotional activity to sustain British interests abroad became increasingly important (L’Etang, 2004, Moloney, 2006). From the early 20th century, the Empire Marketing Board used film to prolong support for Britain across the colonies, as part of what the Foreign Office in 1939 described as ‘a long term policy which, by promoting an atmosphere of international understanding and cooperation, would ultimately benefit both the political and economic climate in which British interests could flourish’ (L’Etang, 2004: 38). As decolonization began and the Empire gradually disintegrated, public relations was used extensively to ensure peaceful transitions and teach newly independent countries to govern themselves in a disciplined fashion. Commercial organizations used communications campaigns to protect their colonial interests during a potentially volatile time, and the industry also benefited as British public relations consultants were called upon to help former colonies attract foreign investment and trade (L’Etang, 2004).

Domestically, public relations grew through close links with the public sector. Local government authorities set up after the First World War adopted communications strategies to encourage citizens to use the new services available to them. During the Second World War, the Ministry of Information disseminated propaganda through film, media and government publications, and its success became crucial to the war effort. Post-war, many military information strategists joined the private and public sectors in senior positions (L’Etang, 2004). Links with government and the wider Establishment have continued as the profession has evolved (Miller and Dinan, 2000, 2007; Moloney, 2006).

In the private sector, public relations came into its own with the advent of professional deregulation and privatization of state-owned companies in the 1980s and 1990s. Deregulation of elite professions like law and accounting opened up lucrative new markets to help them communicate effectively with a much wider range of audiences, while privatization programmes included communications campaigns to promote the new companies and create a share-buying mentality among the public – a fundamental sociocultural shift at the time. Their success established public relations as part of the marketing arsenal for the public and private sectors (Miller and Dinan, 2000; Pitcher, 2003).

In summary, the development of modern public relations in the UK has been tightly linked to the political Establishment and the development of a neo-liberal commercial environment. Public relations was, and is, as much about producing discourses that develop and sustain an environment in which organizational interests flourish as it is about ‘selling’ a product or service. In this sense, it acts as a cultural intermediary by addressing the cultural and social norms associated with particular areas of activity, as well as influencing the practices of production and consumption that characterize those areas.

Public Relations as Cultural Intermediation

Today, corporate and government work continues to dominate the public relations industry (Centre for Economics and Business Research Ltd., 2005). Consequently an understanding
of public relations as a cultural intermediary profession must acknowledge that economic and policy discourses have a cultural dimension to them. This is not unprecedented: Said’s (1994, 1995) seminal work, for example, amply illustrates the inextricable nature of culture and economy and the connections are recognized in more recent research (e.g. Moor, 2008; Nixon and du Gay, 2002; Smith Maguire, 2008). In public relations, this cultural dimension manifests in the symbolic work of associating particular meanings with artefacts, attitudes and behaviours. As in advertising, images and words are combined to generate a particular message, although the written and spoken word (in the form of press releases, interviews, corporate documents and web-based communication), rather than imagery, is the primary means of persuasion. Lash and Urry (1994) argue that the reflexive accumulation that characterizes contemporary economies depends on information and communication structures that circulate symbols, defined as ‘both information and aesthetic signifiers and other non-informational symbols’. This shapes production processes and results in the ‘semioticization of consumption whose increasingly symbolic nature is ever more involved in self-constructions of identity’ (Lash and Urry, 1994: 61). Public relations may be regarded as one of these information and communication structures, given its role in formulating and disseminating information designed to influence values and attitudes about our social and cultural roles, identities and practices, and indeed Bourdieu (1984: 365) names public relations as a new form of cultural intermediary work ‘providing symbolic goods and services’.

This work does not happen in a vacuum and the context is crucial for understanding the nature of public relations’ cultural intermediation. Public relations exists because organizations wish to establish an audible voice in commercial and political marketplaces; this discursive struggle underpins all its work (Heath, 1992; Moloney, 2006). Having a voice that is heard above their competitors allows organizations to attribute symbolic value to particular values, attitudes and practices (e.g. political policy positions, forms of consumption, modes of operating a business) in a way that reinforces their own position and challenges the validity of other perspectives. This work is most effective if the self-interest of the organization in such attributions is misrecognized, so that audiences targeted by public relations work perceive these attributions as common-sense, or in their own or the public interest (Bourdieu, 1991; Palenchar and Fitzpatrick, 2009; Surma, 2006; Weaver et al., 2006). This misrecognition is necessary if the claims made by public relations practitioners on behalf of organizations are to be regarded as legitimate.

In Bourdieuan terms, then, the discursive struggle that underpins public relations’ role as a cultural intermediary is inextricably linked to the acquisition of symbolic power on the part of the organizations for whom practitioners work (Edwards, 2006). This implies that public relations represents a form of symbolically violent cultural intermediation. Indeed, for Bourdieu, language – the raw material of public relations – is a major source of symbolic violence; it expresses the space of possibles available to individuals through field-specific connotations that create the limits of legitimate discussion (Bourdieu, 2000: 57–8). Public relations reflects this, in that it involves the production of discourses that generate legitimacy for a particular point of view and sideline or negate alternative perspectives. It therefore contributes to the construction of social hierarchies by attaching particular symbolic values and interpretations to different positions, and producing tangible material effects as a consequence. As Bourdieu argues, ‘[U]tterances
are not only signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority, intended to be believed and obeyed’ (1991: 66).

Understanding Public Relations Practice

The preceding arguments should make clear that public relations’ cultural intermediary work is related to struggles for symbolic power, and that generating misrecognition, as part of the exercise of symbolic violence over audiences, is fundamental to public relations practice. If public relations exercises a form of symbolically violent cultural intermediation, the question arises as to how the intricacies of practice produce this effect. Critical work has highlighted the manipulative nature of public relations discourses that serve dominant interests (see, e.g., Heath et al., 2009; L’Etang and Pieczka, 2006) but for the most part, in-depth explorations of practice are lacking (but see Pieczka, 2006). Scholars have argued that a better understanding of the practice of cultural intermediaries is required (Cronin, 2004; Murdock, 2003; Negus, 2006) and this article responds to their call with an exploration of how the particular form of cultural intermediation practised by public relations professionals unfolds in their daily work. Before addressing the empirical data, however, I consider how Bourdieu and associated scholars have conceptualized practice and informed the approach taken in this research.

Bourdieu (1990) views practice as the expression of an innate understanding of the rules of a particular game. Temporal and situated, its logic is embedded in the complexity of social life. On the one hand, it reinforces the habitus from which it has emerged and simultaneously validates the structure of the overarching field of power. On the other, given Bourdieu’s argument that habitus is the result of a (forgotten) historical struggle between agents, it follows that practice reflects a fluid rather than static environment. As King (2000: 420) notes: ‘Consequently, because appropriate action is informed by group agreement which is only a negotiated and temporary settlement, there is an openness to practice.’ The limit of this openness is defined at any one time by its location in temporal and social space.

If practice is open yet situated, it must involve choices on the part of the individual about what form it should take in a particular context. Reflection is part of the daily innovation and creativity required for this strategic decision-making (Artaraz, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Mayrhofer et al., 2004; Noble and Watkins, 2003), which is ‘a general difficulty in all moments of action’ (Dalton, 2004: 615), rather than an exceptional circumstance. Burkitt (2002) suggests that this ever-present potential to reflect is due to the range of habitus that agents encounter, which requires them to select from different options for their action. Not all habitus encountered are relevant to every decision; the reference point for reflection will be the habitus of the relevant field or fields in which the individual is engaged. For this study, the question arises as to which fields are relevant for public relations practitioners. What might constitute their temporal and social space, and how are the parameters of their practice set within this domain?

Theoretically, the general limit of public relations practice might be regarded as a combination of the habitus of three interacting fields: the professional field, the
organizational field and the industry field. The habitus of the professional field defines ‘good’ communications practice through codes of ethics, awards and a Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) that provides training in conjunction with higher education institutions. The resultant norms will affect decisions about the appropriateness of communications techniques per se (e.g. is it better professional practice to distribute a press release or create a Facebook site, in order to resolve this particular communications issue?). On the other hand, the habitus of the organizational and industry fields in which the practitioner works will influence practice in a more specific way. In a British university, for example, the organizational habitus will affect the perceived feasibility of particular practices (e.g. would a student-led blog about the university be acceptable to staff and management?), while the habitus of the field of higher education will introduce wider but equally important considerations about the organization’s relationship with other HE institutions (e.g. is this communications initiative and message appropriate to the status of the university vis-a-vis competing universities?). Moreover, because these fields are embedded in, and therefore homologous with, the overarching fields of power and the economy, broader social hierarchies both frame and are likely to be reflected in practice (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

This discussion provides guidance on the analytical focus necessary to answer the main research question of how symbolically violent cultural intermediation works in micro-contexts. Clearly, a focus on practice is fundamental. Specifically, the analysis must explore which practices enact public relations’ symbolically violent cultural intermediation. Also important is how these practices are affected by the professional, organizational and industry fields in which public relations practitioners operate. Finally, the analysis must reveal whose interests the symbolically violent cultural intermediation serves. The remainder of this article presents the case study analysis in light of these foci.

The Case Study: Public Relations in Roule

Based in the north of England, Roule held the government franchise for running a passenger service on a major train route in the UK. At the time of the case study it employed 3100 staff. The company was highly regarded in the industry in terms of the level of service it provided and had received high satisfaction ratings in passenger surveys as well as a number of industry awards for different aspects of its operations. It had led the market in introducing wireless internet access on trains (WiFi), its fleet was being fully refurbished, and it was the only company to retain a restaurant car on the majority of its services.

Roule was suitable as a case study of public relations practice because the Corporate Affairs team had won three industry awards in the previous year for its campaigns. This constituted important symbolic capital that suggested they operated according to the ‘best practice’ norms of the profession. The team comprised Jack Edwards, Director of Corporate Affairs; Harry Staple, Media Relations Manager; Daniel Harman, External Relations Manager; Lewis Penter, Public Affairs Manager; Marisa Shoreland, PR Executive; and Sally Munter, PR Manager. Their overall objective was to protect and enhance Roule’s reputation in order to attract more passengers to the service. Day-to-day work included sourcing stories that would interest journalists, writing them up as press
releases or feature articles, arranging interviews and photo shoots, managing on-station filming requests, developing copy for company brochures, monitoring media coverage, managing crises, handling the publicity for new services, products or corporate announcements, advising senior management on communications issues and liaising with local and regional stakeholders. Tasks were divided according to each team member’s specialist skills.

Roule’s CEO, Oliver Winsome, believed communication was crucial to business success and included Jack in the highest levels of decision-making. The rest of the team were also closely involved with managers and Directors: Daniel and Lewis both worked closely and regularly with them, while media engagement required regular participation from a range of senior executives. Consequently, Corporate Affairs was part of Roule’s dominant coalition with access to highly privileged information and significant symbolic power.

The team also enjoyed strong formal and informal networks that extended through all levels of the organization and embedded the function throughout Roule. Relationships were cultivated through daily discussions with other departments about news stories, product launches, filming or photo-shoots, new products, service disruptions, marketing campaigns, or stakeholder meetings. These connections strengthened the team’s internal identity and reputation. The implied relevance of Corporate Affairs across the business, combined with the common knowledge that the Chief Executive and his Directors valued communications and took the team into their confidence, generated symbolic value for the team’s work and supported their position among the dominant groups in the organizational field.

In 2006, however, this position was disrupted. The company had successfully won a new franchise from the Government in 2005, but that had also been a turbulent year, with terrorist attacks on the London transport network and rapid increases in the cost of electricity combining to reduce passenger numbers and increase running costs. Roule’s growth slowed and it could no longer meet its financial obligations. To make matters worse, in February 2006 the Government ruled that a second operator could run services on Roule’s route, a further challenge to profitability. The pressure intensified on the Corporate Affairs team to demonstrate the tangible impact of its work in the form of increased passenger numbers.

Within the organization, these macro-level difficulties were magnified by Oliver Winsome’s resignation in July 2006, after ten years with the company. His departure was generally unexpected and there was no immediate successor, so the CEO of Roule’s parent company, Alan Horn, took charge as an interim measure.

Micro-level Cultural Intermediation in Roule

Winsome’s resignation represented the departure of Corporate Affairs’ most important sponsor and was a potential threat to the function’s legitimacy in Roule. While the team had strong relationships with other directors and connections throughout the organization, no-one knew Alan Horn. As Jack explains in the following quote, he was an accountant by profession and did not share Winsome’s commitment to communications. Yet, by virtue of his position at the top of Roule, and his role at Roule’s parent company, his
authority became paramount and he therefore held the greatest symbolic power in the organization at the time. This was a challenge to Corporate Affairs’ position:

I know Oliver has put in good words with Horn about you know, me and hopefully the team, [but he] doesn’t really know me from Adam. He’s an accountant, doesn’t have the same political hinterland as Oliver does, he doesn’t perhaps see the influencing side of Corporate Affairs as being very important.

Maintaining the status of Corporate Affairs within Roule at this time was crucial because it legitimized each member’s position in the dominant coalition by sustaining their symbolic power, making their role more difficult to challenge. While Jack focused on developing a relationship with Alan Horn, the rest of the team supported senior management in order to retain their advocacy over the longer term. This was part of Corporate Affairs’ normal practice but became more urgent as a result of the immediate instability. It was done through presenting the company leadership positively in internal documents, and providing managers with appropriate advice, support and coaching for media opportunities.

Following the ‘good words’ from Oliver Winsome, Jack was in fact invited to a number of high-level meetings about how the future of Roule might be managed and succeeded in retaining his position as an important advisor during this period. The immediate danger of irrelevance passed, and once a new CEO was appointed at the end of the summer, an individual with whom Jack had worked at Roule for many years, the team’s internal position was more secure.

Security, however, was a relative luxury; the team members recognized that the political nature of the rail industry meant that change was constant and an accepted part of their environment. From a cultural intermediary perspective, this particular period of extreme uncertainty simply heightened their ongoing efforts to maintain the symbolic value attached to communication in Roule by remaining visible, demonstrating good results and protecting their internal reputation. This meant that the organizational field, rather than the wider field of public relations, had the strongest influence on the team’s decisions about what and how to communicate. Roule’s habitus, structures, identity and purpose formed the ‘rules of the game’ that the team followed. Harry Staples, the media relations manager, spoke about how this affected his decision-making about media strategies.

My priorities here are about what Roule wants and where Roule is going. … you’ve got to think what will be the impact if I do that interview, will it then be ten interviews somewhere else, will it be the story gets revived and more negative publicity around Roule and more damage to the brand?

This is not to say that the wider professional field was irrelevant. While the team’s collective organizational purpose was to protect Roule’s reputation by communicating information to support it, each team member was also engaged in the collective struggle for recognition and legitimacy. The profession played an important part in defining their value to the business and generating symbolic power for them, because it influenced expectations about the benefits ‘communications experts’ could provide. In all their interactions they endeavoured to demonstrate their professional knowledge, while they
promoted the results of their media work through a daily clippings booklet, ‘Read All About It’. While the title might suggest this was simply a straightforward presentation of news about Roule, the team recognized that media coverage was what most managers expected them to produce, and Harry explained the careful consideration given to the booklet’s compilation as a ‘showcase’. Here, the symbolic violence practised by the team took the form of manipulating senior management and staff perceptions about Corporate Affairs’ work, under the guise of ‘objective’ reporting on Roule’s visibility.

It’s important that we demonstrate internally to the business the value of what we do. Some of that sales pitch … is the ‘Read All About It’ document, because on a day-to-day basis … that’s most of the departments’ visibility of what we’re up to. Good and bad, they see it in that. Which is why the layout of it, the choice of what goes where, the priority given to that … that’s why that’s as important as it is. It’s our showcase for what we do.

The importance of this self-promotion was very clear to the team: the more expert they appeared, the greater their legitimacy and the more convincing the claim that communications was symbolically valuable to Roule. To reinforce this value, the team publicized their awards to senior management and Daniel discussed how important these were in promoting greater appreciation of the team’s role ‘up the food chain’.

I would hope that the further up the food chain you go, the more they have an appreciation of the wider Corporate Affairs agenda, its effectiveness – the fact that we won two awards last year certainly helped. It just raised our profile. You know, other parts of the business have won awards and you do a press release about that, but starting to get that recognition of what we do was, was pretty good.

The production of misrecognition in their own interest continued in the team’s work creating and sustaining internal discourses about Roule, thereby shaping the organization’s cultural and social identity. These discourses contained four main themes. First, reputation underpinned success, interpreted as profitability, because it motivated customers to travel with Roule rather than its competitors. Second, the CEO was positioned as the leader of Roule and beyond reproach. Difficulties were ascribed to the external economic environment or irresponsible media ‘talking up’ minor issues. Third, Roule’s purpose was defined in terms of customer interests: the primary objective was to deliver a ‘world-leading’ or ‘first-class’ service. Finally, Roule’s staff, described as a ‘team’ or ‘family’, were responsible for Roule’s success, building on past achievements and keeping reputation intact by delivering ‘first-class service’.

At first glance these themes are self-explanatory and make sense from a public relations perspective. They cast the organization in a positive light and highlight successes rather than failures. However, Corporate Affairs’ interests are served very effectively through them, because they implicitly reinforce the centrality of the team’s remit. The importance of reputation, for example, is presented through a logical argument along the lines of ‘If our reputation is good, we will attract more customers’. However reputation management is a key area of strategic responsibility for public relations practitioners (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009) and the Corporate Affairs team was no different. By positioning reputation as the pillar around
which the business revolved, Corporate Affairs’ role as the caretaker of that reputation became indispensable and symbolically valuable. Similarly, reinforcing the CEO’s leadership meant that those who were associated with him, including the Corporate Affairs team, attracted symbolic capital through that connection. Finally, the importance of company-wide service quality as the basis of reputation legitimized Corporate Affairs’ involvement across the business, since all areas potentially affected reputation and reputation was their remit.

In summary, the team’s cultural intermediation at a micro-level involved exercising symbolic violence over senior management and other staff by manipulating their perceptions of the value of Roule’s reputation and the outcomes of Corporate Affairs’ work in a way that generated misrecognition of the team’s interests and positioned them as working solely in the interests of the organization. The team used the organizational habitus as their main reference point for decisions about their work; the professional field was useful in that it provided symbolic capital that could be used to reinforce perceptions of their expertise. Through this work, the Corporate Affairs function was successfully established as a normative and legitimate part of Roule’s organizational habitus, which helped secure individual roles within the team.

**Macro-level Cultural Intermediation: Reinterpreting Rail Travel**

Corporate Affairs’ cultural intermediary practices also produced effects at a macro-level, in the context of the increasingly competitive and challenging economic and political operating environment. Roule’s brand positioning and external communications were focused on the customer experience rather than functional attributes of rail travel such as punctuality, delivering a person to the right destination, and mechanical excellence. The company enjoyed a degree of symbolic power in the field of passenger transport, exemplified through industry awards and high passenger satisfaction scores, which meant Corporate Affairs could present its definition of excellent rail travel as a benchmark for the industry. In communicating the primacy of the customer experience, Corporate Affairs’ intention was to shift the ‘goalposts’ for competitors, challenging cultural and social norms about rail travel, passenger identities, staff, and service. In other words, Corporate Affairs was engaging in a discursive struggle over social and cultural expectations about what rail travel could and should be, trying to push the debate beyond basics to encompass a passenger-driven agenda. Ultimately, this was a form of symbolic violence that had the potential to shape the existing habitus of the field of rail travel in line with the approach that Roule adopted for delivering its own services.

Media communication was based on this approach and set normative understandings about passenger experiences and services on Roule trains. The cornerstone was that excellent rail travel equated to an excellent consumer experience; logistics were secondary to the escapism that a train journey could offer. The following excerpt from a press release shows the way in which this not only included re-framing the journey as ‘experience’ rather than travel (in this case, as a location for gourmet dining rather than a mode of transport), but also re-framing passenger identities in terms of their tastes and forms
of consumption (here, defined as ‘gourmands and winelovers’). This contrasts with the 
normative understanding of passengers defined by how much they paid for their ticket 
(‘standard class passenger’ or ‘first class passenger’).

The award-winning Roule restaurant and buffet services are anticipating a summer to savour 
with a selection of new dishes and wines to tempt the palettes of holidaymakers and business 
travellers on the Mainline Route … Gourmands and winelovers will find plenty to enjoy on the 
new restaurant menu, which features dishes from Roule Chef of the Year … . Breaded goujons 
of plaice, rack of lamb and baked black cherry and almond tart, washed down with a glass of 
Pinot Noir are just one combination that will turn an ordinary train journey into a culinary 
pleasure. (Press release, June 2006)

Similarly, the next excerpt illustrates how Corporate Affairs used Roule’s WiFi ser -
vice as the basis for arguments that the ‘journey’ could become a seamless part of work 
and leisure activity, rather than an intermediary event between more significant experi-
ences. In this ‘transformed’ context, passengers are active participants ‘making the most 
of their journey’, rather than passive customers being carried to their destination.

WiFi has enormous potential for both business and leisure passengers to make the most of their 
journey with Roule. WiFi creates a truly mobile office for the business user, while leisure users 
can keep up to date with news and sport, including of course the World Cup – or maybe order 
shopping or book a weekend break … The growing number of passengers already discovering 
WiFi tell us it’s transforming their journey experience with us. (Press release, May 2006)

This discourse was based on the assumption that customers’ time was a scarce resource 
because of the level of activity that characterized their lives. Travelling with Roule 
became a means of acquiring more time for leisure and relaxation, an escape from stress 
rather than a source of it. Roule itself became part of the solution to customers’ time 
management problems, rather than purely a supplier of transport. This allowed Roule not 
only to shift the focus to the unique aspects of its service, but also engaged with customer 
concerns about time while avoiding the potentially fraught issue of punctuality, over 
which it had less control.

At the same time, these notions of work and leisure implicitly defined the desirable 
customer for Roule in terms of social status rather than simply transport requirements. 
Work was conceptualized as professional/managerial, involving travel and ‘logging on’, 
activities that largely exclude manual or semi-skilled workers. Leisure was described in 
relation to implicit levels of taste and disposable income: to appreciate the restaurant 
menu you have to be a ‘gourmand’; to check World Cup results online you have to own 
a laptop. As Bourdieu (1984) points out, the luxury of this kind of leisure is available 
only to those who can afford it. Yet Roule’s interest in attracting a particular class of 
customer to generate higher financial returns was masked by a ‘common-sense’ approach 
to transforming what would otherwise be ‘wasted’ time on the train.

In media communications, this redefinition of the customer experience tended to 
revolve around the on-board or on-station experience, since this was where most readers 
would encounter Roule. However, stakeholder audiences were slightly different: they 
included political and business audiences such as local councillors, activist groups along
The railway plays an important, strategic role in the economic and social development of the communities that it serves, which is why Roule invests senior management time in engaging with external stakeholders to explain its strategies and reasons for decisions, as well as the outcomes of such decisions. (Stakeholder newsletter, July 2006)

These messages represented an attempt to define partnerships and community engagements in the field of rail travel in terms that supported Roule’s position. Initiatives were presented as though they were taken purely in the interests of customers or partner organizations; Roule’s interest in increasing passenger numbers so that it could meet its financial obligations remained hidden.

Just as the focus on customer experience validated Roule’s approach to business, the company’s engagement with its stakeholders confirmed its ‘important, strategic role’ in community development. These customer/community messages were complementary: the communities in which Roule was embedded also delivered its passengers. Correspondingly, prioritizing community engagement reinforced Roule’s customer focus and further legitimized Corporate Affairs’ positioning of both the customer (as sovereign judge of Roule’s right to exist) and Roule (as a ‘good’ company that operates in the best interests of the sovereign). At the same time, the discourses underpinned the symbolic value of the team’s stakeholder relations function.

Corporate Affairs’ work was also designed to influence government and the policy environment, since relations with central government had a significant effect on Roule’s viability. This influence was indirect, operating through media coverage and stakeholder opinion (Jack was involved in lobbying strategy, but outsourced tactical work to a consultancy; the rest of the team were excluded). The team regularly communicated about aspects of delivery that related to franchise promises, rather than just the travel experience. For example, social responsibility was a recurring theme in communications collateral, incorporated into Roule’s identity as a responsible train operator and franchisee. However, most of the publicized initiatives related to upgrading stations, refurbishing rolling stock, or introducing new technology, all of which were conditions of Roule’s franchise agreement. Nonetheless, they were re-framed in terms that obscured this legal obligation and instead highlighted Roule’s apparently voluntary commitment to improving the customer experience and local community life. In addition, they were used to demonstrate the company’s industry leadership – as the first operator to introduce WiFi access on-board, the only company to retain a restaurant service, or the first to refurbish ageing rolling stock, for example. Producing misrecognition of the legal context helped
legitimize both the government’s decision to award the franchise to Roule and Corporate Affairs’ attempts to increase the symbolic value attached to Roule’s approach to rail travel.

In terms of broader social hierarchies, Corporate Affairs’ practice was predicated on an acceptance of competitive markets for rail, driven by consumer choice and run by commercial operators, as the best way to operate national rail networks. Roule had been created out of the privatization of state-run British Rail, had performed well until 2006, and therefore had a stake in the competitive market; Corporate Affairs’ work reflected this position. By making the customer experience the foundation of Roule’s success, the Corporate Affairs team validated the neo-liberal principles of consumerism and individual choice. This also served Corporate Affairs’ self-interest since these principles legitimize public relations as a profession: the more competitive the market for rail travel, the more Corporate Affairs work was needed to ensure Roule’s ‘voice’ could be heard above its rivals.

In summary, the team’s cultural intermediation at a macro-level involved attempts to exercise symbolic violence over external audiences including customers, partners, and government, in order to present the fundamentals of Roule’s operations as commonsense and legitimate approaches to business. This involved re-shaping cultural and social understandings of rail travel, passenger, journey and rail operator in ways that privileged the identity, tastes and needs of a particular class of customer. Discourses targeted at media and stakeholders were complementary and designed to produce symbolic value for both Roule’s approach to business as well as for Corporate Affairs communications practices.

Conclusion

In the first part of this article I argued that public relations plays a significant role as a cultural intermediary occupation. I suggested that the cultural intermediation of public relations is symbolically violent, predicated on the misrecognition of vested interests in order to legitimize messages focused on manipulating attitudes, values, behaviours and perceptions of social and cultural environments.

Questions of how, and for whom, public relations practitioners use discourse to secure symbolic power were addressed through the case study, which demonstrated that the organizational field was the primary temporal and social reference point for decisions about practice. In Roule’s Corporate Affairs department, decisions were made in light of the organizational field, its immediate circumstances, and its interests and position in the wider field of rail travel. At a micro-level, misrecognition was driven mainly by the team’s own interests: they communicated messages that could unite the organization in common purpose and deliver loyalty to senior management, in a way that obscured the benefit accrued to the Corporate Affairs function. At a macro-level, misrecognition operated in favour of Roule, with decision-making shaped by the broader economic, social and political context in which the company operated. The team attempted to (re)define and attach symbolic value to key elements of rail travel in a way that appeared to be common-sense, but in fact served Roule’s business strategy by appealing to a particular class of passenger and reinforcing its
position in relation to its competitors. In turn, this supported Corporate Affairs’ position: The more they were able to reinforce Roule’s leadership, the more ‘evidence’ they had that their role was valuable.

This article has aimed to open up new avenues for research on cultural intermediaries, reflecting on the importance of public relations and presenting a formulation of cultural intermediation as symbolic violence, rather than an apparently value-free transmission of taste. In drawing on the case study to exemplify my arguments, I have presented only one ‘particular instance of the possible’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 233). Detailed investigations of practice in different contexts would shed more light on public relations’ cultural intermediation. Research on public relations practices in not-for-profit, government, and arts and culture organizations, for example, would further the analysis and complement the commercial focus of this case. In addition, the interaction of public relations practitioners with other cultural intermediaries, such as advertisers and journalists, would illuminate how the symbolic violence they try to exercise is mediated by other cultural intermediary professions, and how the symbolic power they produce changes and evolves as a result of these interactions. This article also highlights new aspects of cultural intermediation that may inform future research. The theoretical and empirical nature of symbolically violent cultural intermediation, for example, merits further attention in different contexts. The importance of misrecognition of the cultural intermediary’s self-interest, and not only that of other dominant groups for whom they work, could be investigated in other environments. Finally, research could explore the manner in which habituation and openness characterize practice by exploring reflexivity in cultural intermediary practices, which would in turn influence the understanding of self-interest and symbolic violence in these contexts.

Notes
1. All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
2. The case study was conducted from June to September 2006. I was a participant observer with the Corporate Affairs team, supporting the PR Executive and the Media Relations Manager while collecting a wide range of data. The data sources comprised: observations of day-to-day activity, including meetings, telephone calls, interviews, photo shoots; up to three interviews with each Corporate Affairs team member and additional interviews with other members of Roule, with whom the team interacted frequently (22 interviews in total, between 30 and 90 minutes long); three interviews with PR consultants who worked with the Corporate Affairs team; one interview with a journalist who had regular contact with the team; emails sent within the team and between team members and other members of Roule; observations of the corporate environment and the team’s embodiment of their role; informal discussions with the team, after which detailed notes were made; Corporate Affairs outputs, including press releases, presentations, background briefings and speeches; official documents, including the corporate mission statement, internal staff memos and brochures about Roule. Detailed field notes were taken throughout the case study, resulting in a 120-page diary at the end of the three-month period. Interviews were transcribed in full as soon as possible after they took place; documents were collected during and at the end of the case study for subsequent analysis.
3. Lewis had been at Roule for 23 years, 18 of which were in the company’s press office. Jack had 23 years’ experience of PR and had been at Roule for eight years. Daniel and Harry had been with Roule for two years, having worked as journalists for eight and 20 years, respectively. Marisa and Sally had both worked at Roule for seven years, having previously worked with media. Given this experience, it is fair to say that all the team members had absorbed the organizational habitus and the main strategists (Jack, Daniel and Harry) understood the professional norms and values associated with PR and the media.

4. This phrase expresses the fact that there was no personal relationship between Alan Horn and Jack, since the men had not met or worked together before.

References


Lee Edwards’s research interests are in the function of power in and through public relations practice; the interface of public relations with the media and the subsequent effect on the public sphere; and the experiences of difference and diversity in professional environments.