
Editorial 31.4: Forty years after The Velvet Ghetto report – from women’s work to the legitimacy of public relations

Corporate
Communications:
An International
Journal

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In November 2026, it will be 40 years since the IABC Research Foundation published *The Velvet Ghetto: The Impact of the Increasing Percentage of Women in Public Relations and Business Communication* in San Francisco, California. In that seminal report, Carolyn G. Cline, Elizabeth L. Toth, Judy Vanslyke Turk, Lynne Masel Walters, Nancy Johnson and Hank Smith set the agenda for a research program studying experiences of women in PR (Cline *et al.*, 1986). Due to its international impact, the report became a foundational text for research on women, gender, status, labor relations and professional recognition in public relations. The report expressed concerns that women’s growing presence in public relations was not accompanied by higher salaries or higher status and that women tended to be concentrated in technical rather than managerial roles despite their increased presence (Cline *et al.*, 1986).

The lasting influence of the Velvet Ghetto report was its naming of the paradox. Public relations appeared to offer women professional access, education and employment, but this access was not matched by equal recognition or power. The profession appeared open, and it was indeed open compared to other industries as women began to enter the workforce in greater numbers, but the routes to authority remained constrained. The “ghetto” was “velvet” because exclusion was not always visible, as it operated through pay gaps, role segregation, lack of managerial access, assumptions about women’s suitability for leadership, and the symbolic devaluation of work associated with women. The report, therefore, gave the field a vocabulary for understanding gendered professionalization: women could be present in public relations while still being denied full occupational legitimacy.

The report raised questions that were occupational but could also be seen as deeply connected to legitimacy: what happens to a profession’s status, authority and reward structures when its labor becomes associated with women? Four decades later, the question has not disappeared. It has shifted into new questions about race, intersectionality, freelancing, portfolio careers, consulting and independent practice. The “velvet ghetto” was always a question of recognition because women’s growing presence in public relations did not automatically translate into equal authority, equal pay, or equal access to managerial status. The legitimacy of the profession was, therefore, bound up with the legitimacy of women’s communication labor. If public relations was to be understood as strategic, managerial and organizationally consequential, then the work disproportionately performed by women also had to be recognized in those terms. The “velvet ghetto” argument was not simply that women entered PR, but that as women became numerically dominant, the field risked being seen as lower status, lower paid and less managerial (Cline *et al.*, 1986). That was always a legitimacy problem: the profession wanted recognition as strategic, managerial and organizationally essential, while the feminization of the field was used to mark it as softer, less authoritative, or less central to organizational power.

However, PR’s academic legitimacy has been built through women and gender research. Women scholars, who, after the Velvet Ghetto report, began studying the position of women in PR more extensively than ever before, did not merely add gender and the position of women as topics within PR scholarship, rather they helped make PR academically legitimate by showing that the field was a serious site for studying work, power, professionalization, managerial authority, inequality, organizational life and communication labor. Women’s research has been one of the places where PR scholarship became theoretically grounded because women



Corporate Communications: An
International Journal
Vol. 31 No. 4, 2026
pp. 521-528
© Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1758-6046
p-ISSN: 1356-3289
DOI 10.1108/CCIJ-07-2026-409

scholars did not just document inequality in public relations; they also helped define the intellectual seriousness of the field. In 40 years since the Velvet Ghetto report, women in PR scholarship examined *the glass ceiling* (Cline *et al.*, 1986; Dozier, 1988; Toth and Cline, 1991; Wrigley, 2002), *salary inequality* (Cline *et al.*, 1986; Dozier, 1988; DeRosa and Wilcox, 1989; Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Grunig, 2006; Dozier *et al.*, 2007; Creedon, 2009; Beurer-Zuellig *et al.*, 2009; Moreno *et al.*, 2015, 2017, 2018; Tench and Topić, 2017; Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2017; Pulido Polo, 2012), *managerial access* (Cline *et al.*, 1986; Matthews, 1988; Grunig, 1991, 1999; Toth and Grunig, 1993; Toth *et al.*, 1998; Rakow and Nastasia, 2009; Marschlich and Bernet, 2024), *leadership* (Aldoory, 1998; Place, 2012; Tench and Topić, 2017; Dubrowski *et al.*, 2019; Place and Vardeman Winter, 2018; Tench and Topić, 2017; Yeomans, 2014; Topić, 2022; Meng and Neill, 2021), *sexism and masculinity* (Yeomans, 2019; Topić, 2022a), *organizational culture and power* (Grunig, 1990, 1995, 2006; Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Sha and Toth, 2005; Fröhlich and Peters, 2007; Aldoory *et al.*, 2008; Edwards, 2009; Tench and Topić, 2017; Topić, 2021), *diversity* (Childers Hon and Brunner, 2000; Pompper, 2004; Tindall, 2009; Edwards, 2011; Place, 2015; Vardeman-Winter and Place, 2017; Pompper and Ertem-Eray, 2021), *intersectionality* (Tindall, 2010; Vardeman-Winter *et al.*, 2013; Vardeman-Winter and Tindall, 2010; Place, , 2015; Edwards, 2023), *the relationship between gender and influence* (Choi and Hon, 2002; O'Neil, 2003), etc. [1]. The Velvet Ghetto report helped establish women's experiences in public relations as a legitimate area of academic inquiry, and scholars continued to make salary, the glass ceiling, gender bias, discrimination and status central questions in PR scholarship (Toth, 1988; Toth and Grunig, 1993; Toth and Cline, 1991; Grunig *et al.*, 2000; Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Topić *et al.*, 2019, 2020) and began developing a feminist theory for public relations (Aldoory and Toth, 2002, 2021; Grunig *et al.*, 2000; Aldoory, 2005; Childers Hon, 1995; Fitch, 2016; Yeomans, 2019; Yaxley, 2013; Fitch, 2016, ; Bowman and Yaxley, 2022; Golombisky, 2015), further legitimizing the PR field.

Although the Velvet Ghetto originated in the United States and examined issues women face within an American professional context, its influence spread internationally because the questions it raised were not confined to a single national labor market. The report provided the framework through which scholars in different countries could examine whether women's numerical presence in public relations translated into authority, pay, leadership and professional recognition. In an empirical analysis of women in PR scholarship, conducted by a group of European scholars, the Velvet Ghetto report was taken as a starting analytical point and the empirical analysis of literature from 1982 to 2019 showed that the position of women has reached a full circle because the field repeatedly returns to the questions of salary, role segregation, leadership, discrimination and professional recognition (Topić *et al.*, 2019). This study, drawing from the Velvet Ghetto report and subsequent scholarship that happened in the decades after the report's publication (Topić *et al.*, 2019, 2020; Grunig, 1991, 1999, 2006; Toth and Grunig, 1993; Aldoory and Toth, 2002), resulted in a series of international studies looking at the position of women in PR: England (Topić, 2020), Georgia (Kaladze *et al.*, 2020), Croatia (Polić and Holy, 2020), North America (Clayton *et al.*, 2021), Spain (Fuentes *et al.*, 2021), Czech Republic (Hejlova, 2021), Greece (Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2021), Portugal (Cruz *et al.*, 2023) and Quebec (Millette *et al.*, 2023). The influence of the Velvet ghetto report thus lies in its findings and the comparative questions it enabled.

Read 40 years later, the Velvet Ghetto report reminds us that the history of gender research in public relations is also a history of women scholars building the intellectual foundation of the field. This contribution cannot be adequately captured through a list of names, because the work has been collective, international, intergenerational and intellectually diverse. It includes research on salary inequality, role segregation, managerial access, leadership, discrimination, organizational culture, race, intersectionality, feminism, professional identity and the gendered conditions of communication labor. Women PR scholars showed that public relations cannot be understood only as a managerial function or organizational tool. It must also be understood as labor, identity, culture, power, ethics, representation and institutional

practice. This is why the legitimacy of the Velvet Ghetto should not be reduced to the history of women in the occupation. Its larger legacy is that it helped transform gender from a demographic concern into a theoretical lens through which the profession's authority, reward systems and exclusions could be examined.

In the most recent scholarship, the question is no longer whether women are concentrated in PR, but what their work experiences are. Forty years after *The Velvet Ghetto*, the legitimacy problem facing public relations has not disappeared; it has changed form because the feminization of PR once raised questions about salary, status and managerial recognition. Today, gendered patterns of freelancing, flexibility, precarity and entrepreneurial communication work raise related questions about what kinds of PR labor are recognized as strategic, authoritative and professionally legitimate. The Velvet Ghetto was an early legitimacy warning, whereas freelancing is the contemporary legitimacy test. If the *Velvet Ghetto* described a profession in which women's entry did not guarantee authority, the rise of freelancing raises a parallel question: Does flexibility produce recognition, or does it relocate risk onto individuals whose work remains feminized, undervalued and structurally unsupported? This issue of the *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (CCIJ) offers a special issue on freelancing in media and communication industries, extending the question of legitimacy from history to the present. Freelancing is often celebrated through autonomy, flexibility and entrepreneurship, but these terms can obscure uneven legitimacy, unstable recognition and unequal access to authority.

Freelancing as the Contemporary Legitimacy Test

Flexible working arrangements have become one of the defining conditions of contemporary communication industries. Work is now frequently organized through temporary contracts, freelance arrangements, portfolio careers and hybrid employment structures. Flexibility, once framed as an exception to the standard employment relationship, has gradually become a structural feature of communication labor.

Flexibility is associated with autonomy, creativity, entrepreneurship and work-life balance. Yet the growing normalization of flexible labor also raises deeper questions about the conditions under which communication professionals build careers, secure recognition and sustain professional legitimacy. Behind the language of agility lies a more complex transformation in the moral economy of communication labor. The task is not only to ask whether women are present in public relations, as the Velvet Ghetto report did, but also how their work is recognized, rewarded, theorized and legitimized. In an edited book on gender and freelancing, [Anton and Moise \(2025\)](#) showed that freelancing cannot be understood only through the language of flexibility, autonomy, or entrepreneurship. These terms are important because many practitioners experience freelancing as a route to greater control over time, clients and professional identity. However, Anton and Moise's book (2025) also showed that the promise of flexibility is inseparable from precarity, individualized risk, uneven recognition and gendered expectations around care, networking, visibility and self-promotion. This is why freelancing should be understood as a contemporary legitimacy test for public relations and communication work.

In traditional organizational employment, professional legitimacy is partly conferred by institutional affiliation: a job title, employer, department, agency, or organizational role can operate as a form of symbolic recognition. Freelancers often work without this stabilizing framework and continually produce and display their own credibility through portfolios, networks, client relationships, online visibility and repeated performances of expertise. The legitimacy of their work is, therefore, less institutionally guaranteed and more individually negotiated. A future research agenda on freelance communication labor should ask: Which forms of freelance PR work are recognized as strategic and which remain invisible? How do gender, caregiving, class, race, age and nationality shape pricing, client trust and access to networks? How do freelance practitioners build authority without the symbolic support of

organizational affiliation? When does flexibility enable autonomy and when does it obscure precarity? How do clients, agencies, platforms and professional associations participate in legitimizing or devaluing freelance communication work? And how can public relations scholarship avoid reproducing the very devaluation of feminized labor that The Velvet Ghetto identified four decades ago?

This special issue, guest edited by Raluca Moise, Anca Anton and Lea Hellmueller, extends these questions by examining flexible working schemes across media and communication industries. Rather than treating freelancing, telework, gig work, consultancy, or cross-sector career movement as isolated employment arrangements, the issue approaches flexibility as a broader restructuring of communication labor. The contributions ask how flexible work is organized, experienced, narrated and legitimized across different national, organizational and professional contexts. They show that flexibility is also a question of how communication workers build authority, sustain identity, access support, manage boundaries and secure recognition in increasingly fluid labor markets. The issue is organized around the tension between the promise of flexibility and the realities of precarity. The guest editors frame flexible working schemes as part of a shifting landscape marked by autonomy, professional fluidity, digital self-presentation, self-management responsibilities, blurred work-life boundaries and uneven access to stability and support. For corporate communications, the special issue asks a set of important questions for corporate communication scholarship: When does flexibility enable autonomy, creativity and work-life balance and when does it individualize risk? How do flexible working schemes reshape professional identities and sectoral boundaries between journalism, public relations, marketing, advertising and cultural work? How do gender, digital platforms, self-branding, leadership and national labor contexts shape who benefits from flexible work and who is left vulnerable? And what organizational, educational, professional and policy supports are needed if flexible work is to become sustainable rather than merely survivable?

The articles show that flexible work is no longer a marginal or exceptional feature of communication industries. It has become part of the architecture of contemporary media and communication labor. The issue contributes to knowledge by bringing together comparative, cross-sectoral and methodologically diverse research on public relations, marketing, journalism, media and cultural work. It demonstrates that flexible work must be understood through the lenses of precarity, gender, organizational culture, professional identity and legitimacy. The special issue moves the debate beyond whether flexibility is desirable and toward a more urgent question: under what conditions can flexible communication labor be fair, recognized, protected and professionally legitimate?

Freelancing is not a departure from the concerns raised by The Velvet Ghetto; it is their contemporary expression. The issue is still recognition: whose labor counts, whose expertise is believed, whose careers are protected and whose communication work is understood as legitimate.

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Note

1. The references cited here are illustrative, not exhaustive.

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