

**Cronin, A.M. (2016) 'Reputational capital in "the PR University": public relations and market rationalities', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 9(4): 396-409.**

### **Abstract**

Drawing on empirical data, this article identifies the emergence of the 'PR University' as an assemblage. Using a case study of university press officers' work, I analyse how this form of media relations PR stages competition between UK universities through the media. A key form of this competition centres on the accumulation and circulation of what I term 'reputational capital'. I focus on one core element of reputational capital - media stories about HE research and the circulation of research metrics. I argue that the assemblage of the PR University pulls the HE sector into dialogue with PR principles and practices in the context of recent shifts towards market rationalities. But this relationship is not a simple cause and effect model in which increasing HE 'marketization' creates a boom in universities' PR practices, or intensifying investment in PR by universities merely amplifies or legitimises existing market tendencies in the sector. I argue that the PR University as assemblage starts generating its own logics around which actors in the field must orient themselves. More broadly, the PR University operates not only to promote an individual university's market position, but acts upon public debates about the social role, legitimacy and financing of UK Higher Education.

### **Keywords**

Assemblage; competition; market rationalities; neoliberalization; promotional culture; public relations; reputational capital; universities; values.

### **Introduction**

This article explores how public relations work intersects with the UK Higher Education sector to form an assemblage that is the 'PR University'. In the context of shifts towards a marketization of UK HE, I argue that the accumulation and management of what can be termed 'reputational capital' through PR work has become a core element of universities' promotional and managerial practices. My argument is not simply that reputational capital has become more important in HE – and I am not merely elaborating the widespread argument that HE has become 'marketized' or 'neoliberalised'. I argue that PR work in the HE sector does not transparently mediate or channel versions of market rationalities or market practices (including principles of competition, brand identity of HEIs, audit and the framing of economic value). Drawing on recent debates about shifting state–market relations, I argue that university PR acts as an increasingly important means through

which the state (and its institutions such as education) justifies itself to the market through the legitimising function of staging and managing competition. But this mediation is complex and unstable. The dynamics of PR work, and its enhancement and circulation of reputational capital, form an assemblage that is starting to create its own dynamics to which academics and HE managers must align themselves. Media visibility becomes both an end in itself and, in the perspective of HE managers, a proxy measure of an institution's success. Alongside a range of other HE policy shifts, this assemblage is enacting and reshaping specific HE market rationalities – but it is also drawing values and beliefs into this dynamic and setting them into a tense dialogue with market principles. In this assemblage PR does not operate as a straightforward manipulation of 'public opinion', a distorting influence, or simply a conduit for media misrepresentations of HE. The forms of promotional work at play in the PR University do not operate through securing belief in their claims – and scepticism about those claims does not jeopardise the accumulation of reputational capital.

This article does not make broader claims about the contemporary significance of PR or wider PR practices, although its alternative conceptual framework may be translated to other areas of analysis (eg corporate PR or political communication). I focus on a specific aspect of PR in universities: media relations work that is undertaken by university press officers. There are many areas of promotional activity in universities that range from publicising degree programmes, graduate employment figures and university facilities, to maintaining contact with alumni. But it is the area of media relations PR that has grown significantly in recent years allied to changes in HE culture, such as the creation of a competitive HE 'market' linked to the media circulation of various league tables, and an emphasis on the 'impact' of research (McGettigan 2013). Operating alongside media relations PR, HEIs have increased their use of social media and various forms of marketing, particularly in efforts to support student recruitment. Indeed, universities can enhance their reputations in a number of ways, such as recruiting globally recognised researchers. But my data show that it the mainstream media, and PR's claims to 'build relationships' with a range of publics – potential students, funding bodies, corporations, government – which hold most appeal for universities wishing to enhance their reputational capital in the public staging of competition between universities.

This article is situated within a broader project which analyses public relations and its relationship to a shifting public sphere. It draws on semi-structured interviews with a range of PR practitioners and press officers at both pre- and post-1992 UK universities and on case studies of university PR material (press releases and other promotional activities).<sup>1</sup> The roles of PR

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<sup>1</sup> The project's data comprises 50 interviews with PR practitioners (including university press officers) and journalists working within the national media and education trade press, and some observation of PR work. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. All participants and their employers have been anonymised.

practitioners across various sectors can be fairly unstructured and undefined, although 'managing communication', 'managing reputation' and 'relationship building' are deemed core functions (Tench & Yeomans 2009: 5, 41). My data show that PR work within the UK HE sector has intensified only fairly recently, and its relationship to other promotional activities such as marketing is evolving. This article focuses on university press officers whose role broadly mirrors that of PR media relations practitioners in other sectors: it includes fielding media enquiries, drafting press releases about university news or responding to specific events, offering advice to management on media tactics for dealing with sensitive issues, offering media training to staff, monitoring media coverage, developing media strategies, and liaising with external PR agencies. But the role can also involve longer-term strategic thinking about the profile of the university linked to marketing strategy, mission statements, and the university's Key Performance Indicators.

In the wider project, I analysed case study material, such as press releases and media coverage, alongside the interview data. However, the analysis below provides an account of one significant element: university research and its associated league tables and other metrics. Research is a distinctive activity of the HE sector which universities publicise in order to produce specific forms of reputational capital which have gained in significance in today's 'knowing capitalism' (Thrift 2005). In the next sections I integrate a review of the literature with a presentation of my overall analysis. Restrictions on space preclude an analysis of all the core data, but I draw on specific examples that are illustrative of the findings as a whole. I am focusing not on a textual analysis of PR content such as press releases, but rather on institutional aspects of the assemblage of the 'PR University', and specifically how PR practitioners and HE managers understand, act upon, and circulate forms of reputational capital.

### **Public Relations, HE cultures and the 'PR University' as assemblage**

Public relations tends to be broadly defined as 'the occupation responsible for the management of organisational relationships and reputation. It encompasses issues management, public affairs, corporate communications, stakeholder relations, risk communication and corporate social responsibility' (L'Etang 2013: 800). The academic field of PR research divides along several lines, most notably that of a political economy perspective, and that of a more functional perspective focusing on organizational context (see Edwards & Hodges 2011). For instance, accounts emphasize PR's role in bolstering corporate power (Miller & Dinan 2008), the mediation of relationships between politicians, 'spin doctors', and journalists (Davis 2007; McNair 2004), or the role of PR practitioners as cultural intermediaries who manipulate symbolic resources (Edwards 2008, 2012)

and attempt to shape views through ‘velvet glove’ methods of media management (Bourdieu 1984: 154). From an organization studies perspective, forms of PR are seen as ‘institutional work’, operating internally to maintain the form, rules and norms of particular institutions (e.g. Fredriksson 2014).

Accounts have also considered the relationship between PR and wider social change, such as the correspondence between booms in PR activity and periods of ideological shift (Cutlip 1994; L’Etang 2004). Miller and Dinan (2000) link the rapid expansion of the UK PR industry in the 1980s to wider socio-economic transformations such as the privatisation of national assets. While deterministic perspectives on PR’s role in ideological change should be avoided, such historical accounts offer insights into the relationship between market shifts in HE and promotional practices. I build on these insights to develop a distinctive approach that frames HE PR as an assemblage. This conceptualisation offers a productive way to analyse PR – not the PR industry in its entirety (e.g. McKie & Munshi 2007), nor a specialism such as crisis management (e.g. Heide & Simonsson 2015), but instead a framework to analyse PR’s *interface* with specific social institutions (in this case UK HE) and how this interface generates new formations or assemblages that enact material and ideological effects. My account links the dynamics of internal ‘institutional work’ of PR to wider social shifts in HE cultures. I examine this rather broad area through the specific case study of audit and metrics in both university research and in universities’ own assessment of their PR practices. While not capturing all the promotional practices in HE, this case study offers a useful entry point for considering this assemblage’s dynamics. My analysis is part of what Edwards and Hodges (2011: 4) see as a radical turn in PR research in which ‘public relations is recognised as *a locus of transactions that produce emergent social and cultural meanings*’, and to this field I add an understanding of PR as ‘assemblage’ that engenders shifts in both practices and meanings.

I use this concept of assemblage to analyse the connections that my data reveal between market rationalities, cultures of HE, and PR. These multi-layered intersections do not indicate a simple causal relationship (e.g. HE marketization *causing* a boom in PR), and therefore requires a subtle and elastic analytic framework. As a concept, assemblage has gained considerable traction across a range of disciplines, most of which draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004) notoriously abstract philosophical account. Thrift argues that assemblages are not to be understood as,

....homogeneous and tightly knit structures, or even as loosely linked constitutions....

Assemblages differ from structures in that they consist of co-functioning ‘symbiotic elements’, which may be quite unlike (but have ‘agreements of convenience’) and coevolve with other

assemblages, mutating into something else, which both parties have built. They do not, therefore, function according to a strict cause and effect model (Thrift 2005: 94).

The concept of assemblage allows the researcher to focus on connections, the ephemeral, the heterogeneous, the unstable and the generative. An assemblage is therefore not an easily delimited object of analysis. It is an active, amorphous formation that effects material changes, but is also a mode of thinking and analysis: 'The assemblage is less about what it is then, and more about what it can do, what it can affect and bring about' (Dewsbury 2011: 150).

The 'PR University' is an assemblage of HE cultures, PR practices, and the contemporary media context<sup>2</sup>, and includes material practices, discourses, values and an intriguing relation to belief. What I term 'reputational capital' is a key element of this assemblage and has gained in importance due to shifts in UK HE policy. Rather than brand image or 'reputation' with their rather static associations, 'reputational capital' better captures the processes of mediatised accumulation, monetisation, translation and circulation that I have seen at play in universities' practices of promotion. Reputational capital can be seen as a sub-category of 'symbolic capital' discussed by Bourdieu (1986). It is a representational form based on recognition and prestige that aims to secure a privileged position within the field. But I see reputational capital as a distinct subtype of symbolic capital: it takes form through converging logics of distinctiveness and competition in neoliberalising society, the ascendancy of auditing and measurement in defining value, and the enhanced significance of media image in staging reputation. Symbolic capital often draws on historically-embedded privilege and prestige – Bourdieu gives the example of royalty – and accounts that draw on Bourdieu's framework note that PR can manipulate symbolic capital to legitimate power relations (Ihlen 2009). But I will argue that reputational capital is based on a more fluid, fragile enactment of value that is tied to the shifting cultural economy of the media. As I detail below, the force of reputational capital does not lie in people's belief in its empirical validity (e.g. one university being better 'quality' than another), but in how it captures and shapes the dynamic quality of 'reputation' as an instrumental and unstable form of value. In describing reputational capital, I am drawing on and extending Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital, but I argue that its *circulation* operates in a highly fluid and contingent manner best understood through the concept of assemblage.<sup>3</sup> PR acts upon HE, and HE shapes this particular form of PR. Together their enmeshing creates an

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<sup>2</sup> The scope of the article does not enable a detailed account of the shifting media context (see Sinclair 2012).

<sup>3</sup> I see reputational capital as one element of the broader, composite entity of 'brand' which is, 'a platform for the patterning of activity, a mode of organising activities in time and space' (Lury 2004: 1).

assemblage that generates its own dynamics that are neither predictable, nor under the control of PR practitioners or HE managers.

The UK Higher Education sector has been undergoing significant changes relating to funding mechanisms, the introduction of tuition fees, emphasis on student choice, intensification of auditing processes, and a shift towards 'impact'-based research (see Lynch 2015).<sup>4</sup> This has initiated much debate about HE marketisation (e.g. Brown 2011; McGettigan 2013). Holmwood (2014: 69) argues that shifts towards a market-based approach displace careful evidential consideration of the effects on HE provision and elevate 'the axiomatic status attributed to the assumptions of market rationality'. The principle of differential tuition fees, Holmwood (2014: 70) suggests, creates what the government presents as a positive process of 'creative destruction' in HE in which some institutions may fail in the 'competitive "sorting" favoured by market ideologues'. Changes in the UK resonate with what Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) have called 'academic capitalism' in the US where, they argue, universities are not simply being corporatised or warped by outside influences. Instead, shifts towards market processes and ideologies have been internalised in institutions and in a range of actors, including academic staff, managers and students who are 'using a variety of state resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions to the new economy' (2004: 1). This does not simply pivot on reframing students as consumers, but points to broader market orientations evident in the 'internal embeddedness of profit-oriented activities' in universities (2004: 11). It is a focus on internal university practices of PR, and how they reach out to connect with publics through the staging of competition, distinctiveness and reputational capital in the media, that is the key concern of this paper.

While the extent of HE marketisation is debated, there is clear evidence of shifts towards certain market rationalities. The UK university employers' association, the UCEA, identifies in its 2015-2020 plan the key 'environmental drivers and challenges' of 'delivering and demonstrating value for money' and 'differentiating and responding in a competitive higher education market'.<sup>5</sup> University management structures are now modelling themselves more closely on commercial firms (McGettigan 2013), and the range of university staff is widening to include more marketing practitioners (Gordon & Whitchurch 2010). But alongside the expansion of various marketing practices – for instance, promoting degree schemes through social media – universities have also taken on board PR practices and principles from the commercial sector. Although promotional

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<sup>4</sup> On shifting HE policy, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/topics/higher-education>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ucea.ac.uk/en/publications/index.cfm/plan15>. Accessed 2/2/16.

practices are nothing new in universities (see Wernick 1991), and marketing has become increasingly central to HE practices (Foskett 2011), it is arguably the role of PR that is becoming one of the most significant elements of universities' promotional culture. PR logics have become an integral part of university thinking and management practices and, more broadly, the way in which universities engage publics and frame the public value of HE. The growth of the UK PR industry more generally is linked to shifts in advertising, marketing and particularly the financing of media. The revenue that media outlets generate by selling advertising space has fallen dramatically which has impacted negatively on newspapers (Sinclair 2012). The field of journalism is under intense pressure – fewer journalists are required to do more work which now includes blogging and twitter alongside standard reporting (Jackson & Moloney 2015). In my study I found that this pressure forces journalists to rely more heavily for content on press releases produced by PR practitioners, in this case university press officers (see also Davis 2002). With many firms in the commercial sector under severe financial pressure, the 'free' publicity from PR-generated media coverage<sup>6</sup> is highly valued.

In the shifting HE context, I argue that PR is an active force which is gaining in social and economic traction. My data point to two key drivers. Firstly, a well-established function of PR is to facilitate a 'conversation' with the public which 'builds relationships' and enhances reputation (see Tench & Yeomans 2009). In the newly marketizing HE sector, with its attendant anxieties for management about brand identity and competition, PR becomes attractive as it claims to subtly promote an institution's interests while displacing the 'hard sell' of advertising and marketing which increasingly meets public suspicion. Secondly, PR's ascendancy in the HE sector can be attributed to its capacity to stage and shape forms of competition based on reputation that are central to neoliberal capitalism. PR does not simply publicise positive aspects of individual universities – it uses the media to create and manage a hyper-visible stage on which universities vie to create distinctive brand identities, foster competitive advantage, and aim to enhance reputational capital. It thus stages competition based on market principles and in doing so *presents* HE as a form of market – whether or not HE conforms strictly to the standard characteristics of a market.

On a wider scale, PR has gained in significance because it taps into particular driving principles and market rationalities of neoliberal capitalism – but I contend that PR does not simply act as the transparent medium of communication for neoliberalization. I understand market rationalities as that diverse range of ideas, principles, and justifications that inform practices in markets and quasi-markets. While markets are fundamentally based on organising economic life by structuring the exchange between buyers and sellers, market rationalities or logics are the animating principles or ideas of such (diverse) market models and extend their ideological reach beyond the

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<sup>6</sup> Although media coverage generated by PR is framed as 'free' (compared to buying advertising space), it is not without cost as firms must pay for in-house or external agency PR practitioners.

strictly economic into many areas of social life. Contemporary market rationalities pivot on the principle that the most efficient distribution of resources is through competition, price and the provision of information for consumer choice, all of which is assumed to drive up the quality of provision. Such logics are key to understanding contemporary capitalism. As Peck, Theodore and Brenner (2012: 267) argue, framing such understandings in terms of ‘neoliberalization’ rather than neoliberalism better captures the *processual* instantiation of ‘pro-market and pro-corporate rationalities’ which place commodification and competition centre stage, and whose practices are mediated through state institutions such as education or housing. Neoliberalization as a term, I suggest, better captures the unstable, uneven but productive qualities of an assemblage.

Drawing on Foucault’s (2008) account of state–market relations, Wendy Brown (2015) and Nick Gane (2012) examine how the market is increasingly framing the practices and very legitimacy of the state and its institutions. This is a form of governance which is,

...the reverse of Panopticism, for rather than the state watching the market, which is seen to be natural or self-normalizing, the market now penetrates all aspects of both state and society, which in turn are to normalize themselves according to market principles (Gane 2012: 632).

In this context, the state intervenes in order to produce and reproduce competition (Brown 2015). Extending Foucault’s account, Gane (2012) points to the proliferation of measures of audit and accountability (for instance in the National Health Service or HE). These auditing practices, he argues, illustrate how *the state* aims to justify itself to *the market* by creating measures of comparison and principles of competition, thus redrawing the previous dynamic in which the state supervised the smooth-running of the market. In the following sections, I show how PR is becoming a key mechanism through which the state’s institution of HE justifies itself to market rationalities. Such a context of neoliberal competition in HE requires distinctiveness, auditing and measurement, and rewards the accumulation of reputational capital while punishing ‘market failures’. Drawing on illustrative examples from my data I argue that as an assemblage the PR University does not transparently mediate such market principles. Instead it organises unpredictable, fluid, internal dynamics which impact upon the evolving form of HE market rationalities.

## **Metrics, audit and media relations PR**



My data reveal the significance of metrics and audit in both university PR practices and cultures of HE, and show the specific ways in which 'reputational capital' circulates. I use the dissemination of HE research stories in the media as an example. The use of audit and metrics has been widely acknowledged as a key part of neoliberalising cultures (Adkins & Lury 2011; Strathern 2000). Such practices have often been legitimised through the principle of institutional transparency, although it has been argued that audit itself constitutes a form of governance through 'the management of visibilities' (Hansen, Christensen, & Flyverbom 2015: 125). The contemporary dynamics of such audit processes are shifting. For instance, Burrows argues that university research metrics such as the H-Index, 'although still embedded within an audit culture, increasingly function autonomously as a data assemblage able not just to mimic markets but, increasingly, to enact them' (2012: 355). In the next two sections I examine what forms of visibility PR manages, how it intersects with the market rationalities of HE audit and brand distinctiveness, and what forms of active assemblage this engenders. I outline how the PR University as assemblage pulls together: metrics that are staged in the media (especially league tables); PR stories about research and a university's brand distinctiveness; universities' practices of auditing media visibility (and thus reputational capital) generated by PR; and HE cultures that are increasingly oriented by competition and market rationalities. Media relations PR is not a simple conduit that presents or publicizes university research or metrics such as league tables; nor does the auditing of PR practices (through AVE figures described below) merely calculate and present their impact. These practices are part of an assemblage that brings into being its own set of dynamics. For instance, this assemblage starts orienting not only university promotional practices (e.g. targeting certain stories at specific media outlets), but may also act as a proxy measure for managers to assess their management practices and thus begin to shape the specific market rationalities at play.

In the HE sector, some institutions such as Oxbridge have historically relied on symbolic capital. But the active media management of reputational capital is becoming an increasingly important element of universities' branding practices, gaining a more central role in management decision-making processes. Universities attempt to foster reputational capital in a range of ways that do not necessarily focus on media management practices, for instance by manipulating their market position through setting student entry grades (see Foskett 2011). But alongside such activities, PR practices have expanded due to their capacity to stage brand distinctiveness and foster competitive advantage through amassing and defending reputational capital. Within this field of competition, universities' orientation to the mainstream media is significant. For instance, although individual universities have promoted various versions of REF results in order to enhance reputational capital – primarily on their own web sites and social media – my data show that the version of the metrics

developed and circulated by the trade press, particularly *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, holds greater weight within HE promotional practices. Although the use of social media has grown rapidly, it is the publicly visible validation offered by coverage in the mainstream, established media such as the BBC and national newspapers that most strongly orients many universities' media relations practices.<sup>7</sup> University press officers frame such coverage as a more valuable way of speaking to the public as it is less obviously a 'marketing message'. The mainstream media are thus a key conduit through which reputational capital can be gained (and lost).

Using PR to disseminate research findings and thus generate reputational capital is one of the key ways in which pre-1992 institutions attempt to distinguish themselves from their competitors and from the post-1992 sector. Bodies such as the Russell Group lobby not only for the specific interests of their member institutions, but seek to act as the arbiters of HE 'value' (and 'reputational capital') defining it primarily in terms of research, research income and research impact.<sup>8</sup> Shifts in UK HE policy have meant that university research is itself undergoing profound changes. For instance, Knowles and Burrows (2014) highlight how the impact agenda of research funding bodies and the REF is reshaping and hierarchising forms of research, introducing new precarities into academic employment and – through new metrics and the promotion of research findings – setting in place new visibilities of intellectual labour. They ask: 'How are the logics of regimes of visibility actually constituted in practice, and what counts as visibility, and to whom?' (Knowles & Burrows 2014: 252). Below I analyse a specific aspect of these research visibilities by focusing on universities' research-based media relations practices, the role of press officers in their engagement with the wider media field, and the impact of such practices on market rationalities. I analyse one specific but centrally important dynamic – the ways in which practices of auditing and metricisation visible in the various league tables intersect with the dissemination of stories about research and with practices of auditing the value of media relations PR. This initiates its own logics which operate semi-autonomously and start to shape management practices.

Research shows the increased prominence of league tables (Gibbons et al 2015). My data reveals that university management attempt to measure their reputational capital by tracking their position in the many league tables that circulate in the media, and by extrapolating from other metrics such as student application figures. But another metric that is becoming increasingly salient

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<sup>7</sup> In industry terms this relates to the distinction between 'owned media' (universities' own web sites, twitter feeds etc), and 'earned media' (the media coverage gained by PR practices).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, see its 2015 report, 'Engines of growth: the Impact of research at Russell Group universities': <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/policy/publications/engines-of-growth-the-impact-of-research-at-russell-group-universities/>

is media presence. This is a much 'softer' metric than those of league tables or REF, and because reputational capital is seen as rather intangible, monitoring a university's media coverage becomes a substitute measure of fluctuations in that capital. Universities buy into media monitoring services (or 'cuttings agencies') which track their institution's media coverage, and press officers produce summaries of their universities' stories in the media which are then circulated to senior management (sometimes daily). Such auditing practices within the PR University assemblage are starting to create their own rationalities to which actors orient themselves. For instance, metrics on media coverage can be taken as a proxy measure of the success or failure of a broad range of management tactics. One press officer described the significance that management places on such metrics:

'The vice chancellor looks through absolutely every piece of media the university gets every week... he wants it printed out as well, so he actually has a physical copy so he can [MIMES feel the weight]' (press officer, pre-1992 university).

The volume of media coverage is therefore framed as a measure which translates into reputational capital for individual HEIs in the public arena, but which may also be read by management as a metric of their managerial strategies. But the circulation of reputational capital is imagined, and rendered visible in league tables, as a zero sum game in which some institutions' gains translate proportionately into other institutions' losses. Reputation is figured as relative – as a portion of market share – and therefore media coverage is tracked and assessed in comparison to competitor institutions. As one press officer describes: 'I just hear people saying "make sure we've got as much content in the media as [named Russell Group universities]"' (press officer, pre-1992 university). As noted above, this form of market logic is understood by institutions to be dynamic and thus amenable to manipulation. For instance, elite universities are careful to maintain market position by avoiding any association in the media with institutions which hold less reputational capital, while at the same time attempting to gain media visibility in direct association with competitors. As one journalist described:

'Some universities will say "which other universities are you featuring in this piece?" and they'll want to know if it's Russell Group universities. "If it is, we'll happily give a comment. But we don't want to be seen alongside these other [post-1992] universities". Or "if our rival's in there, then we'll give a comment."' (education journalist, national newspaper)

Another reason that the quantification of media coverage gains institutional traction is because it taps into established HE practices of auditing and financial accountability (see Lynch 2015). One key measure of the value of PR, within and outside of the HE sector, is Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE). This metric purports to show the financial value of 'free', PR-generated media coverage by calculating the equivalent cost of buying the same media space to use for conventional advertising. The metric is widely regarded within the PR industry as deeply problematic,<sup>9</sup> as a PR practitioner notes: 'Everybody accepts that the AVE model is completely flawed'. But for clients, its function as an auditing mechanism appears to over-ride its many, widely-discussed inadequacies.

'It's the only tool that we've got really... even though I don't really believe in it, when I tell the dean of the [x] faculty that [the media coverage of] his event has had an Advertising Value Equivalency of more than £200,000 and has reached nearly 14 million people, those are numbers he can understand and he was thrilled with.' (press officer, post-1992 university)

'The quality of [that media coverage] is almost zero, but on a spreadsheet in a corporate report it's - a high number equals "must be better". So it covers their backs, and a lot of management like it because they like high numbers... Whereas if you try and tell them, yes, we might have had 600 articles last year, now we've got 120. But the 120 is a lot better position to be in, it always sounds like you're making excuses... One of our deans is constantly asking for the AVE figures. That's all he wants to know... He's writing reports to our university executive. So on the one hand he's spent, let's say £60,000 on a PR agency... he's got 26 pieces of coverage but beyond that he doesn't know whether he's getting value for money. If he can say that £60,000 has returned £600,000 in media coverage [AVE], he's justifying the cost of the spend.' (press officer, pre-1992 university)

For management, therefore, PR and its auditing through AVE figures may function as a surrogate measure of value, or as a justification or post-rationalisation for budgetary decisions. AVE and other forms of metricisation gain in significance on a practical, everyday level because they allow the auditing of financial spend tallied against the supposed value created through the amassing of reputational capital. The use of metrics in evaluating PR is a highly contested area (see Van Ruler, Verčič & Verčič 2008). But it is clear that PR and its 'flexible' metrics have taken hold because they stage competition, and they allow the (flawed but nevertheless compelling) measurement of distinctiveness and market position which are a central concern of HE management.

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<sup>9</sup> One criticism is that the calculated costs are inaccurate as they are based on standard advertising rate card prices. Companies very rarely pay this rate because they negotiate deals.

My analysis also shows how the intersection of practices of auditing and metricisation in HE (e.g. league tables) and the auditing of PR value (in accumulating reputational capital through media visibility) act as an assemblage which creates new unintended directives that shape university managers' and press officers' practices. For instance, the active management of what universities understand as 'reputation' may start reshaping HE research cultures. In the thinking and practices of university press officers, reputation is not defined as a wider acknowledgement of the sum of an institution's achievements or strengths, but instead, 'Reputation essentially is, what do you want people to know about you?' (press officer, pre-1992 university). This aligns with standard PR thinking on reputation (see Xifra 2012). But in the PR University assemblage, promotional work on reputation which follows the logic of securing 'reputational capital' for a HEI through media coverage creates unintended consequences. It starts to act as a promotional metric which prioritises the creation of a coherent, streamlined brand narrative for consumption by the media: 'it's essentially about what we put in the shop window, but that's not necessarily what is the most important stuff that's going on in the institution, it's the stuff that you can develop a narrative or attraction about' (Director of Communications, pre-1992 university). The advertising and marketing principles of distilling a promotional message by reducing complexity and highlighting a 'Unique Selling Point' take precedence. In my data, press officers described how research that a university may recognise as more intellectually significant is displaced in their media relations work by research which lends itself to distinctive brand packaging for the media. Within institutions rich in research, this process is highly selective and tends to privilege certain disciplines. My analysis reveals a far stronger emphasis on publicising science and technology research and on narrowly-framed forms of social science research that align with current neoliberal policy, commercial or political concerns. For instance, one Director of Communications noted that in selecting material with which to create such media-facing distinctive reputational capital, it is significantly more difficult to develop an institutional brand narrative about humanities or social science research than about science and technology. With increasing emphasis on such capital in a competitive HE arena, it remains to be seen if this selective approach to creating 'reputation' will divert an HEI's internal resources to certain subject areas (e.g. recruiting staff in areas for which an HEI has developed a coherent 'brand narrative' reputation in the media). Indeed, it may even direct funding towards certain areas if Research Councils wish to see increased media visibility for research 'impact' in the public sphere.

Another way in which the PR University as assemblage starts generating its own dynamics is by stoking what Davis, in another context, has called 'a promotional arms race' (2013: 191). In HE, this translates into an exponentially escalating focus on reputational capital staged in the mainstream media. HEIs may fear appearing illegitimate, or risk losing reputational capital, if they do

not engage in increasingly intensive forms of PR and promotion relative to competitor institutions. Additionally, from a sector-level perspective, the greater the pressures from politicians and the public to justify the legitimacy of HE, its funding and its social value, the more intense pressure there will be on managing its media image. Media visibility becomes an end in itself and its auditing through media monitoring services and AVE figures further amplifies this dynamic: it creates a positive feedback loop in which increased media coverage is framed as valuable; the auditing of the volume of those media relations stories seems to confirm that value; and this increased media coverage (and thus potentially enhanced reputational capital) is thought by management to validate their general strategic thinking and management practices.

### **Values, belief and university PR**

I have argued that the PR University is an assemblage that sets into motion dynamics of audit and media visibility which are unpredictable and generate their own logics which begin shaping universities' promotional and managerial practices. My analysis aligns with Burrow's (2012) account of research metrics such as the H-index, but adds another dimension by including the 'softer' metrics of media coverage and, crucially, highlighting the role of belief and values in this dynamic. A key feature of PR's promotional practices in the HE sector is that they do not require belief either on the part of the 'consumers' of the PR stories (e.g. potential students, government, funding bodies), or the 'producers' (HE managers, press officers, academics). This operates rather differently to how 'raw data' such as statistics have been seen to function in the media. Birchall (2015: 187) argues that such forms of data gain traction as they may be viewed as 'pre-ideological' or objective: 'this recalls the common figuration of data as information rather than knowledge or interpretation; as transparent, preinterpretive, pure, raw'. But in university PR, the power of the data presented in media reports on research and in league tables does not derive from any supposedly statistically-coherent account of one university's objective value compared to another. Among HE staff, it would be surprising to find anyone who believed in the empirical validity of the league tables that circulate in the media, the reliability of REF as an absolute measure of academic quality, or that the metric of media visibility of research directly corresponds to the academic value of that research. For students selecting a university, it is less important that they believe the claims about specific institutions' quality than they invest in the understanding that the reputational capital of their chosen university can be translated after graduation into good employment prospects.

It has long been recognised that the influence of promotional forms such as advertising may not derive from any straightforward belief in their claims (Schudson 1984). But the assemblage of

the PR University shifts this relationship to another level by organising the field in which sets of actors make judgements of value. It creates a publicly visible arena which aligns important issues of public value (and indeed public funding) of HE with market rationalities whose logics do not rely on belief – this is in contrast to many accounts of PR which focus on its management of belief or opinion (e.g. Mackey 2011). Instead of managing belief, the PR University's media relations practices operate through staging investments – personal, ideological, and financial investments in HE. Such PR, then, is not simply a mode of perception management or even a manipulation of the nebulous entity called 'public opinion.'<sup>10</sup> It is not a narrow form of 'reputation management', long understood to be a key function of PR (L'Etang 2004). It is a management of the realm which on the one hand hosts the circulation of reputational capital and, on the other, disconnects belief in metrics such as league tables and promotional messages about an HEI's value or status from the value of that reputational capital.

Academics' own orientation to media coverage is beyond the scope of this analysis. But my account highlights how the platform for these new visibilities of research and intellectual labour is shifting and this may impact upon academics' own investments, both in media coverage and academic careers. This may include overt resistance to neoliberal marketising tendencies (see Bailey & Freedman 2011).<sup>11</sup> But it may also include complex engagements in the circulation of reputational capital in the mainstream media. For example, the PR University generates logics of promotionalism that may be misaligned with long-established academic practices and values of research – and the newly intensified logics of promotionalism may have unintended effects. Such conflicts of objectives or values emerged strongly in press officers' accounts of their experiences of dealing with academics. Generally, press officers took as read that academics' jobs include the task of promoting their institution's reputation, but believed that many academics avoided or resisted that responsibility: 'some [academics] don't even think that they work at the university. It's just the place that they go to so they can do their research' (Head of Communications, pre-1992 university). This is presented by many press officers as a clash of cultures: 'Some [academics] are brilliant. They see the value of PR, they actively want to promote what they're doing. Other academic staff, they're not here to increase the reputation of the university. Their job isn't to promote the university. It's their very specific research area and teaching students and that's that' (press officer, pre-1992 university). Indeed, this new assemblage of HE and PR may have the unintended effect of channelling individual academics' investments into enhancing their own reputational capital or using media coverage of their research as leverage within their institution. In press officers' experience, '[academics] like having press releases written about them, not necessarily because they want to be in *The Times* or

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<sup>10</sup> See Davis (2002) and L'Etang (2004) on PR's understanding of 'public opinion'.

<sup>11</sup> Also see <http://publicuniversity.org.uk/>

on the *Today* programme, but because they want to assert their importance within the institution' (press officer, pre-1992 university). The long term implications of media visibilities may not yet be clear, but will necessarily include a wide range of academic investments.

If this form of PR is 'institutional work' (Fredriksson 2014) oriented towards harmonising the norms, values and practices of an institution then it appears to be highly unstable and contested. In the context of the HE sector, I have argued that PR is better understood as an assemblage that throws together conflicting values and practices without necessarily resolving them or aligning them to standard neoliberal or marketising logics. Future studies could explore both academics' own practices relating to PR, and the wider impact on HE policy that these intensifying forms of promotionalism may effect.

## **Conclusion**

'The PR University' is an assemblage that emerges from the constellation of market rationalities facilitated by national policy changes and from internal HE market-oriented PR practices. Some years ago Andrew Wernick (1991: 154) coined the term 'the promotional university' to exemplify the extension of commodification and promotionalism throughout society, highlighting universities' increasing use of marketing, branding and corporate sponsorship. But the 'PR University' shifts the emphasis of that promotionalism in two key ways. Firstly, universities' promotionalism is not restricted to publicising degrees or research findings: the PR University captures and pushes forward an idea of the university as a market actor and folds PR thinking and PR practices into core university decision making. I have shown how this dynamic operates in one area – PR relating to research, research audit and metrics. These metrics gain institutional and general societal traction because they offer a means of assessing reputational capital *as competitive advantage* as it is staged in the media. I have shown how the intersection of the auditing of PR practices (e.g. through AVE figures) with research audit practices (e.g. REF and league tables) creates a self-inflating economy of promotion in the context of intensifying market rationalities in HE. Alongside a range of promotional activities such as marketing, PR sets the stage for the public visibility of intellectual labour in HE. But PR and its associated measurement metrics are not just surface gloss or promotional puff: PR is an assemblage that can increasingly generate its own form of market logics to which actors within universities direct themselves and which speak to 'publics' and shape public debate about the value of HE. Media visibility becomes an end in itself, but this media staging introduces multiplying uncertainties in which reputational capital can be easily lost – and opens HE to intensified public scrutiny framed by the shifting and unpredictable terms of media reporting.



In a more general context, Davis (2013: 198) suggests that PR is ‘the Trojan horse of marketization’, implying that PR practices dissemble certain realities while slyly inculcating market principles. This leads into the second way in which the PR University differs from Wernick’s promotional university. I would agree that PR practices parade in plain sight market rationalities such as brand distinctiveness and competition while simultaneously weaving them into the fabric of institutional thinking and practice. Indeed, I have shown how HE PR practices start generating their own dynamics and creating unintended outcomes, such as media-directed brand distinctiveness, while exponentially increasing promotional practices. But my analysis adds another dimension. The PR University as assemblage stages forms of promotionalism that are not reliant on anyone’s belief in the messages it communicates, and are not compromised by any disbelief in its claims. Rather than manipulating public opinion as some accounts emphasize, this form of PR stages and manages investments – financial, ideological, personal – in Higher Education.

This may impact upon academics’ personal investments, values and belief in their work. But on a broader scale, these promotional practices feed into wider debates about the public value, legitimacy and funding of HE. Many accounts have argued that PR ‘involves the production of discourses that generate legitimacy for a particular point of view’ or acts to negate alternatives (Edwards 2012: 441). Adding to this, I argue that PR’s legitimising role also operates on a macro-scale which may not be the aim of specific PR practices, but nevertheless flows from PR’s overall impact. PR is a key mechanism through which HE competition is framed and managed, and is therefore an increasingly important mode through which market rationalities circulate and mutate. As an institution controlled partly by the state and partly by the market (McGettigan 2013), UK HE exemplifies one way that the neoliberal state now acts to justify itself to market principles. The flow of legitimation is reversed and in these new dynamics, promotional industries such as PR gain an enhanced position. This highlights PR’s role, not of a simple a medium which imports (neoliberal) ideology from one realm to another, but of an active force that reshapes market rationalities, defining what counts as legitimate market objects (e.g. specific forms of academic research) and market values (HE competition, distinctiveness). It remains to be seen how these dynamics will develop. But what some see as HE PR’s core function of communicating specific types of research findings (particularly scientific or technological) may become folded into definitions of legitimate HE research. As a specialist HE PR practitioner put it: ‘universities have got to be useful and I do think that a large part of research has got to be applied, in which case it needs to be disseminated to industry’.

In the context of the reconfiguration of state–market relations discussed by Brown (2015) and Gane (2012), I have argued that promotional industries such as PR function as the market’s

actors. But I have also argued that the assemblage of ‘co-functioning “symbiotic elements”’ (Thrift 2005: 94) which comprises the PR University opens up patterns of thinking and practice whose outcomes are not easy to foresee and which will not necessarily follow standard patterns of neoliberal marketization. ‘Real-world experiments in neoliberalization routinely – indeed, predictably – fail. But they typically fail in such a way as to engender new rounds of experimentation’ which can be seen as a ‘failing forward’ (Peck, Theodore & Brenner 2012: 274). My analysis has framed the shifting market rationalities of HE, and PR-generated reputational capital, as an experiment in values and valuing. The assemblage that is the PR University throws together multiple and conflicting values and practices: the experiment may well ‘fail forward’ in terms of how firmly strict market logics take a grip on the sector.

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