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## Why Do We Treat PR Like a Pink Ghetto?

By [Ann Friedman](#)

Like any journalist, I'm on the receiving end of a fair number of PR emails. Frankly, sometimes they suck; but I can admit that I've gotten some good ideas from publicists, too — there's a range from annoying to on-point. One thing is pretty consistent, though: PR emails almost always come from women.

The job of producing hard-hitting, democracy-protecting journalism is still, statistically speaking, the domain of men. Most newsrooms are more than [60 percent men](#), whereas [73 to 85 percent](#) of PR professionals are women, depending on how you tally it. They're women who are paid, in essence, to develop relationships with journalists like me and influence our work. “Phoniness is a criticism leveled again and again at PR as a practice that, after all, necessitates an expression of enthusiasm for a product because of pay rather than passion,” [writes](#) Jennifer Pan in the latest issue of *Jacobin* magazine. While there are many men in PR — including 80 percent of upper management — it's women, often young women, who are likely to be doing the grunt

work of sending emails and writing tweets and cold-calling contacts. The very work that journalists, and the rest of us, are likely to see as fluffy.

Even when women are doing promotional work at higher levels, they still struggle for respect. Take, for example, the case of Whitney Wolfe, the woman whose marketing efforts guided Tinder's massive growth. She recently [sued her co-founders](#), one of whom said Wolfe "makes the company look like a joke," for sexual harassment and pushing her out of the company. Given that a dating app is nothing without users — especially female users — and the only way to gain users is through PR and marketing, it's clear that this work is important and valuable. Not to mention quite challenging. Yet the profession remains synonymous with the worst female stereotypes.

"Publicists are constantly made fun of and mocked for seemingly low intelligence. I had that perception of it before I got into it," says Meredith Fineman, founder and CEO of FinePoint PR. "I did every area of communications — marketing, advertising, events — but felt like PR was fluffy. I couldn't have been more wrong." The Princeton Review, in its guide to careers for college students, [explains](#) that "the successful PR person must be a good communicator — in print, in person and on the phone. They cultivate and maintain contacts with journalists, set up speaking engagements, write executive speeches and annual reports, respond to inquiries and speak directly to the press on behalf of their client." So why do we associate PR professionals with mindless fakery rather than hard-won relationships and quick thinking?

On a New York *Observer* [list](#) of fictional publicists in pop culture, every notable character since the mid-'80s is a woman — typically sharp-tongued but not supersmart. Think Jennifer Saunders on *Absolutely Fabulous*, or Debi Mazar on *Entourage*. One of the most popular sketches on Comedy Central's *Kroll Show* is "[PubLIZity](#)," a reality-TV parody starring Nick Kroll and Jenny Slate as vapid pseudo-professionals in neon heels. Even when they're portrayed as savvy, like *Sex and the City*'s Samantha Jones, PR people are never intellectual heavy-hitters. They are the working world's sorority girls: salad-eating, prosecco-ordering up-talkers, manicured to the hilt.

The stereotype that public relations is not a serious job has bled beyond media and into the tech industry. If a start-up does have a female co-founder (and less than [13 percent](#) of start-ups do), she's likely to be in what's referred to as a "nontechnical" role, often as chief marketing officer. "Valley residents and observers understand the value of the programming, of 'making something,' [writes](#) *Wired* columnist Clive Thompson in a post on Medium. "But they don't grasp the importance of the second part — 'selling it.'" Whitney Wolfe's hard work and subsequent dismissal at Tinder is just the most recent prominent example.

Perhaps this is because good PR is supposed to be invisible. "I spoke to Kelly Cutrone recently, who is a friend, about this idea of the 'dumb PR girl,'" Fineman says. [Kell on Earth](#), Bravo's reality show about fashion PR maven Cutrone, lasted a single season in 2010. "She made a solid point: If you're good at it, people only see the shiny outcome. They see the trick that you have performed and they don't see the hours and work that go into it, and that means you've done a good job." A journalist is rarely going to admit they got a great idea from a press release. Someone who downloads an app or attends an event usually won't pause to think, "How did I hear about this?" We only notice PR work when it goes horribly awry.

Or when it comes to self-promotion. The invisible labor of PR becomes suddenly visible when women are promoting themselves, which is perhaps why women are so often apologetic about it. Self-promotion means directly asking for attention instead of gaining it through proxies like journalists. In the era of Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, even those of us who don't make our living in PR must decide whether and how to brag about an awesome new job or get friends to sponsor us for a charity run. We've seen how pop culture portrays the women who write these emails and tweets for a living. We've gotten the message. We don't want to be thought of as attention-whores, too.

It's why so many emails and posts from friends promoting their own work come with an apology. My inbox is littered with disclaimers like "I hate hate hate hate self-promo, but ..." and "Self-promotion can be yucky, but." Then there are those who claim "Shameless self promotion!" They are letting you know that they recognize society wants them to be ashamed for seeking attention, and hoping to defuse the annoying-narcissist stereotype by acknowledging it outright. "I'm not that good at self-promotion, myself, and that's because I'm usually uncomfortable with it," a fellow journalist wrote me once. "I think a lot of that has to do with being a woman, and with taking hits for being 'braggy' or 'narcissistic' at some point along the line for seeming confident or proud of my work."

This is a core professional dilemma for women publicists, and you'd think that in the social-media era, the rest of us would be able to relate. "I walk the line every day between persistent and obnoxious," Fineman says. It's a fine line. Perhaps it's time for us all to recognize that walking it isn't easy.

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