**Culture Comms 2016 Meet the Journalists:**

Anna Russell (AR)  
Marisa Bate (MB)  
Emily Gosling (EG)  
Laura Gallant (LG)

Chair: Sara Wajid (SW)

Introductions..

EG – Used to work for Design Week and It’s Nice That. Now freelance, covering art and design

AR – Arts and culture for Wall Street Journal in Europe, covers art, books, film, TV

MB – Senior Editor at The Pool. Their core audience is women, covers lots of topics from politics, art/culture to sport

LG – Photo editor at Buzzfeed

SW – First question – characterise relationship with PRs, highs/lows?

EG – Generally really positive. Different working with culture prs to product. Generally telling you something you’re interested in. Helps to know the area you cover. That awareness and all the little things like people getting your name right…remembering things, approaching you about the right things, cultural PRs do this. Negative things – not supplying good images. Install shots are always quite shit. Especially with graphic design, and painting and things. Frustrating. Awareness of images.

AR – Amazingly positive experiences so far. Started a year ago, learnt lots quickly, helpful to have quick lowdowns from PR people quickly/ especially with art fairs when I was going for the first time, so comms people were helpful with research beforehand. Negatives – get a ton of communications as cover a broad range of things. Getting multiples of the same email is annoying. (SW- where do museums/theatre sit?) – I tend to write a lot about exhibitions, I don’t do reviews, but features and back stories. Recently started doing more theatre, but still new.

MB – Because The Pool is new (was at the Guardian before) cultural PR is more polite. Much harder when at a smaller place because people approach you less. It has taken a while for people to believe in us. We work in all areas of culture. The Length of emails gets me. No email needs to be 800 words long. I don’t understand why people do that. We’re a tiny team and we produce a LOT of content. I need to hear it like you’re telling your friend about a cool show. I notice it with the arts – across the board, book publicists do it too. It took you ages to write too. So that’s my bugbear. But compared to a lot of other industries (govt, music) much more polite, and understand the site.

LG – Going to start with negatives. Pictures are hugely important – they grab you before you’ve read anything. High res please. No small thumbnails that are pixelated. Send them when first pitching a story. Positives – learning about the different UK institutions has been great. Some of the best pieces I’ve done have been from PRs sending information over that I would never have known about before. 15 photos and I can make a story out of it.

SW – Buzzfeed didn’t exist when I came into the workplace. What’s your reach? Do people treat you like traditional media?

LG – I get an array of stuff which is really great, e.g. a pic post about theatres, and one about porn sets. People want to see something that’s different and shareable – ‘omg you’ve got to see this’.

SW – how do you pick your stories? Create more news? Your criteria? And how much comes from PRs?

LG – My own ideas cover about 50% of the stories I do. Different museums/independent art places will send me pitches. I ask for more than 10 pics if going to be a picture post – to seek people scrolling through their phones. Strong, cohesive and shareable.

SW – Any cold spots?

LG – I don’t know. just sent it.

MB – Often the story is about the woman in the story. A great woman. There are so many entry points. We’re looking for women (e.g story about a fisherwoman – really cool) there’s no reason I wouldn’t want to hear from an unusual source. We’re quite current affairs based, so our news comes from the news – our morning conference spirals. We did a thing with the globe recently where Lauren Laverne curated some stuff with new female singers. We’re open to everything. We’re a tiny team, but we commission out a lot. The internet is an endless treadmill that we’re constantly catching up, so we’re delighted to get stories and great ideas.

SW – Why should someone come to you rather than the One Show?

MB – Our readers are really engaged. We have an intense relationship – back and forth like a dialogue. Women writers often get shit on Twitter, but our writers have said they get less. We try to be a safe space where we promote women. Our readers trust and believe in what we recommend. They get angry if we recommend something that they don’t buy into. We might have a smaller reach, but in terms of turning it around into visits/buy/read, we’re quite powerful.

AR – Based in London, but write for a US audience (but taking place in Europe) if there’s any connection to the US, or maybe someone who is going to break out to the US so I can introduce them to a new audience. Someone well known in Europe.

SW – Why are you covering Europe output at all?

AR – London has one of the highest concentrations of amazing museums in the world. Our readers are affluent and can travel, so I can cover things that people might be able to go see – exhibitions that are open for a while is helpful. I like quirky things too – a soft spot for weird and wonderful.

SW – Are you able to follow your own specialist interests? e.g if you had a feminist agenda could you cover that? Is it worth people knowing your specialisms?

AR – I have an obligation to pitch stories that our audiences will enjoy. I don’t get assigned stories though, so if something seems fun to me I will pitch it (e.g. travel story In Switzerland tracing the dada trail). I do really like nerdy literature things too. Virginia Woolf!

EG – it’s really changed with different publications. Design Week is very news led – we liked scoops, news desk vibes. It’s Nice That was a bit more of a mixture – young designers and illustrators very aware of the platform. It’s a big network. Lucky to be In London because the design world is pretty small and chummy. What I’ve found as freelance is also a mixture. There’s always an extra hook to a story. E.g. Oscar Wilde prison exhibition, turned into how he has influenced gay culture. Really fun to research and getting the most out of a story. For Vice dance music channel a photography exhibition about 90s rave culture in London. Can an image/story spark something wider?

SW – Do you have a strong enough niche for your specialist subjects?

EG – I love writing LGBT stories, youth culture, dance, but my nuts and bolts is art and graphic design. I wouldn’t want people to think I’m just into one particular story – I like to surprise myself. People are good at remembering what you like.

SW – All v busy and quite London based. Some regional people here. Let’s have a discussion about that – within an audience you’re desperate for people to come to press views – very visible. Come to the launch/view. How much time have you got to do that? When works best for you? How much can you do of that stuff outside London?

MB – We’re a very London based team, tiny, not much time. We do go to things after work. We try to get to as much as we can. I find it weird when I’m invited to things when I’ve never had correspondence with an organisation before. I find that alienating and that would deter me, if I don’t know what the place is about or why they think we should cover it. My editor is hot on things being not London only, but realistically there is a huge chunk of readers in the south east so we have to remember who we are actually talking to. It’s something we struggle with – we just can’t get to places.

SW – Good to know, and best to be clear.

LG – After work is probably the best time for us to go. I try to pass invites along if I can’t go or if it’s not specifically for me.

SW – And how useful is that for covering a story?

LG – Sometimes.

SW – And outside London?

LG – We’ve got people around, some in Scotland. I’m American!

SW - There’s a sense and a curiosity about places outside London. Is London a bloated city full of faceless bankers? I’m trying to get a sense of whether you might be losing out on stories about other places.

EG – I think it’s so important to get out. Understand when teams are tiny and pushed. I’ve noticed this accelerating in the last couple of years that people don’t feel they are working unless they are at desk from 8 till 8. You’re as much at work in a gallery or on a train to Liverpool as you are if you’re at a desk. If the opportunity does come up to go elsewhere for the day, you’ll realise life doesn’t end outside the M25. It’s a shame how that working culture has evolved. It comes from the top, and it should be junior journalists who are out and about. Making sure you can make the time is really important.

SW – Are you freer to be on the road as a freelancer?

EG – It’s even more valuable to meet new people and see work, gets you out and away from the house too.

AR – I agree that getting out is better for stories. But for us there are two in my team, so we do have to pick and choose what we can do. We can’t accept paid trips or press trips. I get these amazing offers and I cant take them. It would be a big thing of festival to get me out – so I got to Edinburgh for the fringe and Art Basel, and got a lot of stories out of that.

SW – Final question about audiences. How can cultural PR people help organisations reach new audiences? Where does that sit with you and your priorities? Reflection on profile and demographic of your audiences?

AR – Our readers are really broad across the US, we’re trying to write for people who are interested in the arts but don’t know a ton about it. So I strive to be able to understand it and to include as many fun, relatable tidbits to make it accessible.

SW – Very high levels of education are associated with the fine arts. As a writer how do you low/high art. Sounds like you’re still thinking about a fairly constrained range.

AR – I love stories about art exhibitions, I love cult favourites (e.g. peep show - the audience is strong at sharing). I do a mix of high and low culture. We don’t do a lot of super youth things. Our readers are a bit older, so we lean toward bigger names.

EG – Great that you’ve addressed the white middle class elephant. When you work for an editor who is obsessed with page views, not negating the writers role because we are all responsible, but you know if you put tits in the title it’s going to get clicked on. you get a horrible ‘I could spend a lot of time writing something valuable’ or ‘I could take two minutes and get a ton of page views’ choice – analytics brain

SW – Popular click bait vs more ‘worthy’ stories?

EG – When you’re on a small team trying to get 11 stories out in a day, it’s not a nice feeling.

SW – Let’s say there’s a show by a black artist vs Bowie show at V&A – are the parameters in which you’re working saying that you need to give space to an artist who is recognised across a broader spectrum?

EG – There’s a problem with visibility. There are two issues – one who is presenting work by black/gay/etc artist? And two who is reading about it? Engagement comes at a much broader level. When Barbican did that thing in Barking a while ago, that begins a different type of engagement or relationship. I don’t think it’s necessarily about the language journalists use, it’s about finding underrepresented artists, making decisions from a moral as well as analytics place. Arts and culture from a grassroots level to reach as many people as possible. Big issues!

SW – What does your office look like?

LG – We pride ourselves on being diverse, and we have a lot of people writing about diversity.

SW – If I came to your office would I stick out? Age range?

LG – Most of us are quite young, 21 is not uncommon. Massive range of ages though.

SW – Over to audience questions

Q – To all of you, sending pictures – what’s the best way of sending them to get them noticed? Attachments? Body of emails?

EG – Journalists are lazy – need to see them immediately. Body of email.

LG – Make a good contact sheet, with 3-5 of the strongest after that, then send the rest through. High res that you can zoom into.

Q (from Flint PR) – I wonder if there is a disconnect between how we talk to you, and how you are subject to your editors and how that gets translated. Sometimes we don’t understand the pressure and priorities you are put under by your editors.

MB – That’s a huge issue. We’re compiling so many bits of content, it’s so much about the mix. 10 stories a day, dependent on all the mix of things we’re covering – you might have a great story but editor says ‘not today’, so a story might slip which is frustrating. There’s some logic to that, but not always. I can usually cover things I believe in and want to cover, but up to a point. has to also be true to the brand. We have a massive screen with numbers on, so I can see how many people are reading a piece

AR – Our organisation is so big and amorphous, a story will go through multiple layers of editing before it sees the light of day. There’s only so much I can do within that. Editors will push it in different directions, with hopefully the end result close to what I started with. But not always.

EG – Just bear in mind that we’re all human beings. An editor might be having a good or bad day. There are so many stories around and you wouldn’t cover the same thing twice. in term sof language with it’s nice that it’s just ‘look at the pictures’

AR – A journalist’s job is managing their editor and learning how to pitch to the editor.

Q – It’s interesting because it’s something we don’t see and it’s a bit of a mystery.

Q – (Gareth from Leeds) Of the nice short snappy emails you get, what do people leave out? What do you have to ask for?

EG – Pictures!

MB – Where it might fit on the site. Where we might run it. Morning email? Friday PM culture slot? Know your outlet/target. A really good top line helps – preparing me for that next stage of approaching my editor. I’ll come back to you on the detail, but I need to know the hook. Its’ all about sharing – how would it go on twitter or when you’re telling your friends?

Q – (Susan – National Museums Scotland) I’ve been noticing a lack of availability for feature writing – so we’re often having to write things ourselves. Is that a concern?

EG – Forward those on to me!

AR – It’s a huge issue for us to deal with. It would be different as a freelancer

SW – Is it particularly features space that is squeezed?

AR – I write features

Q – What is the best way to chase? How not to irritate you? Traditional pitching? What works for you?

LG – If I get something I immediately try to think of the title. If you can pitch a great 10 photos and give me a headline (10 most beautiful?). I do appreciate a healthy reminder – by email – the stuff I do really like gets flagged around the office even if I can’t do it.

MB – Healthy harassment works. Often over something else – that person is in my ear. It’s a difficult line to get right, and I apologise on behalf of all journalists as this isn’t something we always get right.

AR – Want to tell you to piss off, but sometimes I end up writing a story after the third pitch email. So it’s worth following up. But when someone calls me when I’m on deadline, I’ll still want them to send an email.

EG – I quite like it when someone talks me through something on the phone – old fashioned that way, but email too!