Commentary: new technologies, public relations, and democracy

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Abstract

This commentary is based on Hiebert’s keynote address given to BledCom 2004, the 11th International Public Relations Research Symposium on “New Concepts and Technologies for Public Relations, Public Affairs, and Corporate Communication,” Bled, Slovenia, July 2, 2004. It suggests that the new communication technologies can save democracy by restoring dialogic and participatory communication in the public sphere, thus preserving a role for public relations as two-way communication rather than propaganda and spin. However, the pathway ahead for public relations is strewn with landmines.

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1. Introduction: communication and authority through history

If the medium is the message, as Marshall McLuhan theorized, then the new communication technologies may well be the most conducive to democracy of all the mass media. The Internet itself is far more likely to bring about a global village than the ubiquitous television sets that McLuhan visualized. But future control of these new technologies by the powerful few is not beyond question.

If we look at history from the perspective of technological determinism, we can see that each innovation in communication technology brought us closer to a democratic world. Democracy can only exist when competing interests can occupy the public sphere, and each innovation expanded the competition. But it is also important to note that the communication innovations themselves led to battles between those who
used them for more public dialogue and those who sought their control. Those new ways to communicate have often been used by authorities to prevent the very competition they had inspired in the public sphere.

The development of writing certainly challenged the authority of the witch doctors of a prehistoric oral society. But engraving the writing onto stone gradually restored the authority of those in power. When Hammurabi in the 18th century BC had his decrees carved on stone pillars, it was to make them immutable and make him the ultimate authority. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he brought with him the Ten Commandments, handed down from God, engraved on a stone tablet. Interestingly, he then forbade the Israelites from having any further graven images.

But the invention of parchment and papyrus ultimately challenged the immutability of stone. Parchment and papyrus wound up in scrolls are much better for poetry and mysticism, for psalm writers and prophets, than for rational laws, science, and journalism. Even though the logic of scrolled communication was easier to challenge than engraved stone, the ancient Hebrew priests kept their scriptures locked in the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies, available only to the high priests, as their way of maintaining authority.

The Romans developed the binding of scrolls into books, called codex because that simple innovation allowed discussion of the laws in their forums. Bound books, unlike scrolls, could be examined and compared, and this paved the way for a society where laws could be challenged. In the Dark Ages, the Church, not wanting any challenge to its authority, kept the hand-written books chained in monasteries and forbade even the reading of the Bible to all but the chosen few.

The development of printing in the 15th century was the greatest innovation of all, because few of the subsequent communication inventions could have been achieved without it. Printing made the Bible widely available and democratized a large part of Christianity, as well as Western economics, politics, and science. Books made scientific inquiry and global exploration possible. Newspapers made a mercantile and middle class possible largely by the spread of advertising. In the 18th and 19th centuries the triumph of democratic and parliamentary systems over monarchies was possible because citizens had more daily information they needed to be informed voters. In his new book, *The Creation of Media: The Political Origins of Mass Communications*, Paul Starr (2004) shows how a decentralized media in the 19th century, including even the telephone system, spurred the rise of democracy in America.

But even in a democratic age of newspapers, there have been those who have sought to control public communication for their own purposes, economic as well as political, and in the short run some have succeeded. Examples of the centralization and authoritarian control of media over the last century or two are plentiful and well known. One example, however, is instructive for our purposes. In the United States in the latter half of the 19th century, newspapers became big business, and a few of them were able to nearly monopolize the public sphere. It was a condition that only grew worse as the 20th century progressed.

There was a time when radio and television saved the U.S. from the domination of big newspapers. For a time, over-the-air broadcasting was the people’s new medium, involving citizens once again in civic life. Radio ultimately helped bring about the downfall of an authoritarian system in the old Soviet Union, because radio could transcend national borders and Berlin walls and Iron Curtains. And then videotape and VCRs helped get television images over those same barriers.

But broadcasting, too, has gone the way of big newspapers. Starr writes that in the last two decades of the 20th century, American government deregulation of broadcasting and telephones allowed relentless commercialization and a concentration of power. By the end of the 20th century, a few major global media
companies had come to dominate the world’s public sphere. Such media were easy victims of spin, writes the U.K. author George Pitcher (2004) in his new book, *The Death of Spin?* Pitcher predicts that the new communication technologies will ultimately discredit the spin.

2. Civil society, mass media, and the rise (and fall) of public relations

Civil society, or democracy, requires a level playing field in the public sphere, meaning that competing interests must have more or less equal access to the marketplace. But media concentration and corporate globalization have tilted the playing field. We know now that mass media, because of economics as well as politics, are no longer likely to provide equal access, if they ever were. The only possible solution is public relations, not in terms of spin or propaganda but in terms of developing real public relationships in the public sphere.

The rise of big newspapers in the late 19th century probably led to the genesis of public relations as a profession in America. The earliest U.S. pioneers in this work, like Ivy Lee, felt that they were balancing the scales of public dialogue by getting their clients’ versions of reality into the public sphere to challenge the versions of powerful newspapers.

Lee and most of the other American PR pioneers had themselves come out of journalism, and they were staunch advocates of a free press and democratic values. They maintained that sooner or later truth would emerge in a democratic society with a free and competitive press. Lee believed that a free press would force his clients to operate transparently and honestly. So to win public support they had to have good truths to tell, an idea that led to notions of social responsibility and charity, activities that became associated with public relations.

Democracy surely can only exist with a free press, where competing interests can access the public sphere, allowing citizens to make free choices. But there are always those who seek to monopolize that space for their own self-interests, whether for political power or economic gain. The 20th century, it seems, was characterized by battles to maintain and extend authority (or market share) by controlling mass communication and information. Those who sought such ends employed their wordsmiths not to interpret, clarify, and explain, but to obfuscate, cover up, and mislead. And so in the 20th century two different kinds of public communicators emerged—public relations practitioners in the Ivy Lee mode, and spin doctors, perhaps best illustrated by Joseph Goebbels.

Today spin doctors in the Goebbels model who serve the interests of global corporate cartels seem to dominate. Stuart Ewen (1996), in his book, *PR!: A Social History of Spin*, describes our modern situation. He acknowledges that publicity is essential to civil society, but, he writes, it “becomes an impediment to democracy . . . when the circulation of ideas is governed by enormous concentrations of wealth that have, as their underlying purpose, the perpetuation of their own power. When this is the case—as is too often true today—the idea of civic participation gives way to a continual sideshow, a masquerade of democracy calculated to pique the public’s emotions” (p. 410).

Ewen continues: “In regard to a more democratic future, then, ways of enhancing the circulation of ideas—regardless of economic circumstance—need to be developed. We need to imagine what an active public life might look like in an electronic age. We need to discover ways to move beyond thinking of public relations as a function of compliance experts and learn to think of it as an ongoing and inclusive process of discussion” (Ibid.).
3. Civil society and new technologies

The new technologies could be an innovation in public communication that could revitalize civil society, as earlier innovations have done. We might be witnessing, in the early 21st century, a return to participation in the public sphere, brought about by the computer, the Internet, the World Wide Web, and wireless digital communication. Of course, much effort is being put into making those technologies even greater tools of propaganda, mind control, and hegemony than anything before.

We’ve already seen examples of a new kind of warfare that uses new technologies as its weapons for the public mind and sphere. In the March 2004 train bombing in Madrid, the terrorists used mobile phones to detonate the bombs. But mobile phones and digital technology may have served a more democratic purpose in the aftermath. On the eve of the elections that followed the attack, text messages and e-mails raced around Spain, urging support for the Socialists or the ruling Popular Party. The *International Herald Tribune* concluded that “cell phones may have tipped the scales in that election” (Pfanner).

In many places in the world, the Internet and cell phones have been used in impromptu ways to help rally mass movements for political change. In the Philippines, a text-messaging campaign is credited with removing President Joseph Estrada from power. A similar campaign helped Roh Moo Hyun win the presidency in South Korea. David Broder, nationally syndicated *The Washington Post* columnist, recently returned from China where he reported that he found Chinese students living on the Internet, which he called the most open forum for ideas in China, full of web sites that pop up in such profusion that the government cannot effectively control them.

3.1. The case of the 2004 American election

In the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, the new technologies had a profound impact. They helped create a real public debate about crucial issues in a way we hadn’t had for many decades, and most of that debate happened not in newspaper editorial pages but on-line. New on-line interest groups raised more money from grass-roots contributors than ever before. These on-line groups got more people involved in the process than we had seen in the recent past. The percentage of voters increased considerably in the November election, probably because of the effectiveness of this new communication possibility.

For example, MoveOn.org, a liberal advocacy group, in 2003 helped organize one of the largest anti-war rallies in history, with more than 10 million protesters around the world, and later engineered a multi-million dollar ad campaign against President Bush. At the same time, RightMarch.com organized millions of conservatives on-line. By the November election, these and other on-line advocacy groups were reaching millions daily.

Web logs, or blogs, became crucial new media for political debate in 2004. There were thousands of political blogs, each with its own usually partisan position on the nation’s politics, and some attracted such sizable followings that they were considered important media for political advertising.

3.2. The case of the war in Iraq

The war in Iraq provided another opportunity to observe the impact of the new technologies. The American government has frequently been wooed into authoritarian tactics by promises from spin doctors that they could spin the government’s version of war and the need for war and the control of the public sphere during wartime. And so we had the framing of the weapons of mass destruction, and Iraq’s
connection to Al Qaeda, and the promise that democracy in Iraq would be forthcoming quickly and easily.

American media, too much in the hands of the dominant paradigm, were easy and willing victims of the government’s spin. (For a more complete analysis of the U.S. government communication effort in the Iraq war, see Hiebert, 2003.) By its own admission, The Washington Post (perhaps speaking for all American newspapers) acknowledged that “The valor of thousands of U.S. soldiers has been well reported and photographed [while] the images of the costs, in fatalities and life-altering casualties, have been less well recorded” (Getler). But the new technologies forced a reckoning that the influential press had to recognize publicly. The Post also admitted, “This is a different and very brutal kind of war, and it may go on for a long time, with digital technology intruding more and more on news decision-making” (Getler).

Much of the government’s framing ultimately proved to be wrong. Some deceptions were so blatant that even a compliant corporate-owned press had to point them out. But often the truth emerged because the new technologies provided access to information and communication in ways that mass media had ignored. Citizens with cell phones and digital cameras were able to transmit images and information that have revealed new truths.

An example was the revelation of prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Mainstream mass media in America were not the first to bring us this news. But web sites were full of images of prisoners being beaten, tortured, and humiliated. The Washington Post admitted in one of its columns that Abu Ghraib showed that “the Internet once again proved to be the place millions of people turned to get the scoop on a big story” (Walker). Americans could log onto aljazeera.net, or back-to-iraq.com, or islomonline.net, or electroniciraq.net, or alternet.org almost as easily as they could get The Washington Post and The New York Times.

Some of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs, apparently taken by the soldiers with their omnipresent digital cameras, were made into huge posters which were posted in places like the New York subway system, to be seen daily by millions of commuters. Columnist Jim Hoagland asked presciently, “Is the most affluent, developed and fully informed society in history organized to wage an extended modern war that is captured – in its every phase – on cameras?” The new technologies, of course, make that possible. Hoagland’s (May 9, 2004) answer is, “not yet.” This suggests that, for the time being at least, the new innovations in communication can restore the competition of ideas in the public sphere, with authoritarianism giving way ultimately to democracy.

The new warfare in Iraq was not easy for an invading army that might have been used to more complete control of communication. Christopher Marquis, in the International Herald Tribune, reported that, with satellite TV dishes sprouting on rooftops in Baghdad, Mosul, Basra and other cities, commanders had few defenses in the information wars against Al Jazeera’s version of reality. Marquis says that “to combat these images, commanders are directing soldiers and marines to use their personal digital cameras to take pictures of insurgents shooting from mosques, from behind crowds of women and children or other places that would violate the law of war norms. The photographs would then be made available to Western and Arab news outlets” (Marquis). This new technique of media relations uses new technologies to battle new technologies.

A number of independently-produced documentaries in 2004 provided Americans with alternative visual images that the government and the corporate-owned media would have preferred to keep from American citizens. The documentary “Control Room” played in large movie theaters, providing vivid imagery of the Iraq war from Al Jazeera’s perspective, even while the U.S. military was targeting Al
Jazeera as an enemy propaganda agent. Michael Moore’s “Fahrenheit 9/11” became the blockbuster movie of the 2004 summer, with previously unseen critical footage of the Bush administration and its foreign policies.

3.3. Transparency wins, propaganda loses

The most powerful weapon in human communication still is the truth, as trite as that might sound. Truth, said John Milton, is what emerges in an open marketplace of ideas. In the early 1950s, Edward Barrett, then the U.S. assistant secretary of state for public affairs (later dean of the Columbia journalism school) wrote a book called *Truth is Our Weapon* (1955). Barrett was concerned about the propaganda wars with fascism and communism. He had been vice president of Hill & Knowlton and a former newspaper editor and publisher, and he chose the Ivy Lee mode of public relations. He believed that only by being totally transparent could the U.S. win the Cold War against an opaque adversary. His philosophy, fortunately, was adopted in the early days of the U.S. Information Agency and the Voice of America and shaped much of America’s Cold War communication policies.

With the end of the Cold War, I believe, America may be losing the war for the hearts and minds of the rest of the world. The White House, seduced by its power, has fallen for the temptation that one-way communication is easy and effective and thus it could spin its policies and influence not only on its own citizens but the world.

However, governments that have depended on spin and information control have never succeeded for long in the modern era, even though many have been tempted and a few became enormously powerful. The two greatest propaganda machines of the 20th century—the Nazi fascists and the Soviet communists—did not survive the twentieth century. As in the past, the demise of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes might well be brought about by innovations in public communication that have enabled ordinary citizens to bypass government spin and expand the public dialogue.

4. Landmines on the pathway ahead

New technologies today, however, lie on a pathway full of landmines, often caused by innovations deliberately created to frustrate their unfettered use. Most of the new technologies can still be used to enhance a liberalizing bottom-up communication essential for a democratic public sphere. Most important, they have opened up worldwide access to information on an unprecedented scale. They have allowed individual challenges to authorities, even through guerrilla tactics. They have allowed people to join forces in new groupings that aren’t dependent on established political organizations and which do not have to wait for elections to achieve results.

But they can also be used to enhance an authoritarian, top-down communication. They can facilitate direct communication with target publics, bypassing critical media intervention. They can increase surveillance capabilities and privacy invasion. They can use computers as “intelligent agents” to predict our interests and responses. They can very effectively co-opt the news media.

Landmines for individuals include privacy invasion and identity theft, and for the public sphere as a whole the problem of inequity among individuals will grow. The gap is widening between the information-rich and the information-poor. And yet the new technologies have also opened up a whole new world of information for individuals that never had access to it in the past. The new technologies are getting
cheaper and more widely available, and a good example is the vast number of poverty-stricken masses of India who go on-line these days.

Landmines for organizations are perhaps even more significant. Organizations with digital assets can be attacked, as Kirk Hallahan (2004) points out, by attackers, hackers, lurkers, rogues, and thieves. Cyber-terrorism has been called the most important threat now facing the developed world. According to Mike France in Business Week in 2001, “Chinese hackers have been targeting Taiwanese web sites for years. Whenever tensions between India and Pakistan rise, programmers from the two countries trade blows. And in the Middle East a full-scale cyber-war is under way between Israelis and Palestinians. Already, it has disrupted life for a wide range of companies, government agencies, non-profit groups, and private citizens . . . . Experts fully expect state-sponsored hacking to become a tool of international warfare one day . . . . In the future, if a country wants to attack another country’s power grid, rather than dropping physical bombs, it may do it through electronic bombs” (April 30, 2001). By 2005, we may be there already.

Jeffrey Geibel, a public relations practitioner, is looking carefully at the new technologies to see how digital tools and audiences are changing public relations. His web site (geibelpr.com) is worth checking. He has concluded that digital public relations requires a rethinking and restructuring of conventional public relations techniques. Search engines, for one thing, have changed everything. Geibel calls it The Google Zone. A press release that gets into the Google Zone is not going to go away any time soon. It could go to unintended audiences and be there to embarrass the sender for years. Geibel (2003) suggests that more than ever before, the communicator must carefully weigh not only the timeliness of the content and its method of dissemination, but also its complete accuracy.

The Google Zone may be both the best thing that has ever happened to democracy, and possibly the worst. Search engines such as Google, Yahoo, AltaVista, Lycos, Infoseek and others have grown rapidly. In the past 3 years, Google has more than doubled from processing 100 million searches per day to over 200 million, in 89 languages, two-thirds of the searches outside the U.S. VeriSign, which processes domain requests (whenever anyone types in .com or .net) was processing 600 million requests per day in 2000, and by 2003 it was processing nine billion. Google’s robotic explorers now search more than three billion pages of data. Search engines allow anyone with an Internet connection to download anything at any time. And Wi-Fi, or wireless fidelity, using radio technology, provides high-speed connection from a laptop or PDA from anywhere.

4.1. Networked audiences require two-way communication

Pitcher, in The Death of Spin?, writes that “As society continues to change, we should understand that audiences are not separate islands to be reached by linear channels, but [now] wholly integrated elements of the culture in which we live . . . . The networked nature of the digital age massively extends the scope and range of human communication by reducing the constraints of geography, audience reach, time, and resources” (p. 51).

Thomas Friedman, writing in The New York Times in 2003, concluded that Google is integrating the world. But while this is certainly good, it also “will make it easier for small groups to rally like-minded people, crystallize diffused hatreds and mobilize lethal force.” And, he continues, “wait until the whole world goes broadband—a much richer Internet service that brings video on demand to
your PC ….” Friedman suggests that broadband will revolutionize the recruiting of angry and dissatisfied audiences. “Ever seen one of Osama bin Laden’s recruiting videos?” he asks. “They’re very effective, and they’ll reach their targeted audience much more efficiently via broadband” (June 29, 2003).

Friedman’s solution is that those who want to protect themselves from terrorism must practice the public relations that Ivy Lee proposed almost a hundred years ago. Friedman says we “have to take [others] seriously, we have to be good listeners, and we have to work even harder to build bridges.”

4.2. But malicious influence might also be enhanced

Friedman asks the question, is Google God? Joel Achenbach, writing in The Washington Post, indicates his answer is probably yes. Google, he writes, has helped change the world. “Google works. Google knows.” If there is any information still chained in figurative monasteries, Google will unchain it, writes Achenbach (February 15, 2004).

However, Achenbach writes about another kind of landmine in this, too, and it is called an “intelligent agent,” allowing computers to predict our interests, desires, and thought processes. The possibility of using this to control the human mind is very real, Achenbach writes, “As the web has grown, it has developed a kind of embedded wisdom … . The way one part links to another reflects the preferences of web users—and Google [has already] tapped into that. Google, in detecting patterns on the web, harvests meaning from all that madness.”

“This points the way,” Achenbach writes, “to one of the next big leaps for search engines: finding meaning in the way a single person searches the web. In other words, the search engines will study the user’s queries and web habits and, over time, personalize all future searches.”

Dan Gruhl, of IBM, told Achenbach that a new field is developing called “user modeling.” “It’s all about computers watching interactions with people to try to understand their interests and something about them.” The computer becomes an “intelligent agent,” and can learn your habits, thought processes, and interests. It can become “your secretary, your colleague, your counselor, your own graduate assistant doing research for which you’ll get all the credit” (Achenbach).

Primitive intelligent agents already exist. After you’ve purchased several books on Amazon.com, their computers predict your book interests and the next time you log on you might get a list of their recommendations that they think fit your interests. Imagine the marketing tool that this might become. Or the political tool, too, modeling your political interests and steering information to you that might influence your thinking. Public relations practitioners are already using computers to target appropriate media or editorial personnel, but imagine how user modeling can enhance that process, or become a tool of malicious influence.

Achenbach also suggests that this “digital self could become a commodity, something marketable.” Suppose you’re dissatisfied with your ability to search the Internet so you download Bill Gates’s intelligent agent “to help you ask smarter questions and find better answers” (Achenbach).

The new technologies can and will, in the short run certainly, enable individuals to better fulfill their own destinies, empower them with information, and enhance a democratic world. But, like other new media before them, they could also become tools of tyranny and suppression. What happens will ultimately depend on what we let happen, how vigilant we will be, how much we listen, and how much we participate in the world around us. I wish us all luck.
References