Public Relations and *Post-Communication*

Addressing a paradox in public communication

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Abstract

Organizations spend more on public communication today than ever before in history. Yet, in the past few years developed Western countries where investment in public communication is greatest have seen a collapse of trust in government, business and major institutions and landmark uprisings of citizens against the persuasion and promotional campaigns of governments, political parties and big business. Industrialized democratic societies cannot ignore events such as *Brexit*, the election of Donald Trump, 'hung parliaments' in several countries, and increasing challenges to businesses' social licence to operate. This paradox – declining public trust, support, and stability at a time when investment in public communication has never been higher – indicates that there is something wrong in the way organizations seek to engage with their stakeholders and publics today and that change is required. This paper presents a reflective critical analysis of public communication approaches today drawing on a body of recent research rather than a single study, particularly focussing on theories and practices in public relations and 'strategic communication', and compares them with contemporary concepts such as *design thinking*, *emergent strategy*, and *Theory U* to present an argument and a direction for transformation to address the paradox in public communication.

Introduction

There is a paradox in the public sphere of major developed democratic societies, particularly in the USA, the UK, a number of European states, and even in young democracies such as Australia. Organizations including government departments and agencies, political parties, businesses, and non-government organizations (NGOs) spend more on public communication today than ever before in history. For example, advertising expenditure surpassed US$500 billion in 2015 and is predicted to exceed US$600 billion in 2018[1]. Public relations is reportedly growing by around 10 per cent a year in developed countries and by up to 20 per cent a year in fast developing countries[2]. Yet, in the past few years developed Western countries where investment in public communication is greatest have seen a collapse of trust in government, business and major institutions[3] and landmark uprisings of public sentiment against the persuasion and promotional campaigns of those who purport to serve, represent or govern them.

Prominent among these has been *Brexit* – the UK referendum vote to leave the European Union after 40 years of membership – and the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States.

What many commentators and analysts have noted since these events is that they were noteworthy not only for what people voted *for*, but what they voted *against*. *Brexit* and the Trump election were rejections as much as they were expressions of support, and we need to understand what was rejected, and why, as well as understand and accept the will of the people as it has been expressed.

Methodology

This analysis critically reflects on the findings of a number of related research studies conducted over the past three years, rather than one specific study, as well as a broad review of literature in public communication and related disciplines. While the findings of specific studies are important for gaining in-depth insights into particular issues, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on a body of data with the benefit of spatial and temporal distance and to draw together atomised findings to identify patterns or trends that emerge. Specifically, this analysis is informed by three inter-related research projects as follows.

1. Extensive study of evaluation of public communication. Evaluation is an informative vantage point from which to observe public communication because evaluation models and practices identify the strategic intent and objectives, the activities undertaken, and the outcomes and impact achieved. Whatever might be normatively advocated in theory, measurement and evaluation is where we see what organizations actually do to whom, and for what purpose. As Tom Peters said "what gets measured gets done"[4]. After working in and studying evaluation of public communication for two decades[5], in the past three years the author has been directly involved in reviewing the Barcelona Principles[6] and developing the evaluation framework of the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC)[7]; served on the Evaluation Council of the UK Government Communication Service (GCS); been a member of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) Task Force on Standardization of Communication Planning and Evaluation Models; consulted to the European Commission Directorate-General for Communication evaluation unit; completed a major study of evaluation of advertising and communication for the largest state government in Australia; and conducted interviews, content analysis of evaluation models, and literature review for a book, *Evaluating Public Communication*: *Exploring New Models, Standards and Best Practice*, published in September 2017[8];
2. Three studies of the use of social media for corporate and political communication, allegedly as channels for increased two-way interactive engagement. These studies are reported in *The 21st Century Media (R)evolution*[9] published in 2014 as well as a number of journal articles.
3. The Organizational Listening Project, an ongoing project that so far has closely examined the public communication and engagement of 48 organizations in four countries, exploring how and how well they listen compared with how much they speak. After conducting a study of the public communication of corporate, government, and non-government organizations in the USA, UK, and Australia in 2014–15, in 2016 this project involved six-months full-time research inside the UK Government before, during and after the EU Referendum (*Brexit*). The research was supported by UK GCS headquartered in the Cabinet Office, Whitehall, and Number 10, Downing Street, which afforded open access to UK government departments and agencies. In the same period, the Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission in Brussels invited review of its communication strategies including the European Commission *Strategic Communication Plan 2016–2020*[10] and the *White Paper on the Future of Europe*[11]. In total to date this research has involved more than nine months of intensive first-hand observation of public communication by corporate and government organizations (ethnography); more than 200 interviews; and content analysis almost 1,000 documents. The findings of Stage 1 of this research have been published in a research report[12] and a 2016 book, *Organizational Listening: The Missing Essential in Public Communication*[13], and the findings of Stage 2 specifically focussed on government communication have been published in a 48-page research report[14] and a number of journal articles[15].

Research questions

Drawing on this body of research, the following analysis attempts to bring into context some of the events that have been happening. Are they unrelated isolated events? Or is there a common theme or pattern emerging? Are they just politics, or are there broader implications? In the context of this particular discussion: 'What has this got to do with public relations and other professionals engaged in public communication and what is increasingly referred to as 'strategic communication'?

The collapse of trust

The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that just 41% of people trust their national government; only 43% trust their media; and only slightly more than 50% trust business and NGOs. Furthermore, and significantly, public trust in all four institutions has fallen compared with previous years[16]. Business is actively distrusted in 13 countries including some of the major developed markets such as the UK, Germany, Japan, and Australia, and now more than 40% of people distrust business in other major markets including the USA and Canada.

In an address to the National Press Club in Washington DC in October 2017, Richard Edelman declared that "the new battleground is trust" and added that who to trust is the "defining question of our times"[17].

Academic research confirms this collapse of trust, especially among young people. In the US, a 2015 Harvard University study found that less than one third of 18–29 year olds trust the President – and that was in relation to President Obama, only 14% of young Americans trust Congress; only 12% trust Wall Street; and only 11% trust major media[18]. The Pew Research Center has reported that in 2017 trust in the US President has reached its lowest level since recording started in the 1960s[19].

The European Union, one of the most significant economic, social, and political initiatives since World War II is witnessing a serious decline in public trust. Trust in the European Commission has fallen from over 50% in 2006/07 to just over a third (36%) in 2016[20] – in short, two-thirds of 500 million European citizens do not trust their regional government and the mechanism that has bound Europe together and maintained peace and stability after the horrors of two world wars.

There are undoubtedly many reasons for this collapse of trust. But, professional communicators and communication researchers need to consider two things in relation to trust:

1. First, there needs to be recognition that, in an environment of low trust, future public communication by government, business, and other types of organizations is unlikely to be effective. Rebuilding trust is a pre-requisite for credible effective public communication;
2. Second, if we are honest with ourselves, we need to ask whether public communication had a hand in causing the loss of citizens' and stakeholders' trust.

The 'insurgence of the unheard'

Given falling public trust, it should be no surprise – although it has been to many – that we are seeing landmark outpourings of public frustration and outrage.

The June 2016 referendum vote by UK citizens to leave the European Union, referred to as *Brexit*, was contrary to the strong recommendation and confident campaigning of the government and led to the resignation of the Prime Minister David Cameron and 13 of his Ministers. It was unexpected even by the 'Leave' campaign and its leading proponents such as Boris Johnson. It was also contrary the predictions of most polls and opinion surveys. For example, the 2016 *British Social Attitudes* survey published just a few weeks before the referendum reported that 60% of UK citizens were in favour of remaining a member of the EU and only 30% supported Britain's withdrawal from the EU.[21]

Donald Trump was regarded as unelectable by both the Republican and Democratic parties and by almost all pollsters and political pundits. His election shocked the world.

These are not the only recent political events worthy of note. Just 18 months previously, a referendum narrowly maintained Scotland as a member of the UK. The Scotland Referendum saw 44.7% of Scottish citizens – almost half – vote to leave the UK. In June 2016 Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said that a second referendum on Scottish independence was "highly likely".[22]

Just one year after the shock *Brexit* vote, the new British Prime Minister, Theresa May, took the UK to a general election with predications by her party and pollsters of a large majority. As is now part of recent turbulent political history, the UK Conservative government led by May suffered a massive swing against it leading to a 'hung parliament', which forced the UK PM to broker a coalition of convenience with Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in order to form a government.

Australia, one of the most stable democracies for more than a century, had five Prime Ministers in six years between 2010 and 2015[23] and entered 2017 with a national government holding power by just one seat. This was the second time in five years that Australians rejected both major political parties and faced the prospect of a 'hung parliament'.

Professor of Political Communication at the University of Leeds, Stephen Coleman, refers to these events as the "insurgence of the unheard"[24]. This is a theme I will return to in a moment.

The public communication related to these and other recent events and developments have led political commentators and philosophers to make a number of alarming pronouncements.

Post-truth

In September 2016 *The Economist* declared that "the world has entered an era of "post-truth politics"[25]. This pronouncement was triggered by the controversial presidential campaign of Donald Trump. Trump is far from the first politician to make statements that are factless as well as tactless – although arguably he has taken this to a new low level. The term 'post-truth' has been picked up by headline writers and media commentators across the USA and in nervous nations in Europe, South America, and Asia.

By year end, Oxford Dictionaries announced 'post-truth' as its word of the year, defining it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief"[26].

In an academic analysis Jayson Harsin argues that post-truth is more than a simple disregard of facts and reliance on emotional appeals by a few politicians. He refers to a "regime of post-truth"[27]. Harsin says a convergent set of developments have created the conditions of a "post-truth society", pointing to:

- The fragmentation of media and the loss of media 'gatekeepers';
- The pursuit of celebrity, infotainment, and *tabloidization* in popular media – that is, journalists are complicit as well as critical in relation to post-truth;
- The growth of professionalized PR and 'spin';
- Algorithms that govern what appears in social media and search engine rankings;
- Internet practices such as 'click bait';
- As well as other economic, technological, social, cultural, and political developments.

Post-democracy

During the past decade, a number of political scientists, sociologists, and media and communication scholars have expressed growing concern about what they term "the democratic deficit"[28]. UK political scientist Colin Crouch goes further and describes the current state of politics and government in the major developed Western countries as *post-democracy*.

Crouch defines post-democracy as a democracy that continues to have elections and allows freedom of speech and even freedom of assembly, but in which political participation becomes mostly spectatorship, with decision-making and power held by political and financial elites[29]. He argues that post-democracy is a withered and emaciated political system that is emerging in place of democracy. For instance, in his book *Coping with Post-Democracy*, Crouch says:

> While elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them[30].

Crouch is not alone in his concerns. In his book *How Voters Feel*, Stephen Coleman makes a number of alarming observations about elections.[31] Coleman notes that "moments of voting are remarkably fleeting" and "curiously socially disconnected"[32]. He reported from his research that elections and voting are predominantly understood and assessed in terms of "instrumental effectiveness"[33] measured in terms of voter turnouts, percentage swings, and winning, and he concluded that democratic practice has deteriorated to "a discourse of arid proceduralism"[34]. Coleman concluded that "the rules of the political game seem too much like imposed rules and someone else's game" and, as a result, the disposition of citizens towards traditional political engagement is "inflected by the weight of thwarted experience"[35].

Post-politics

Some argue that the collapse of trust in major institutions has gone beyond post-democracy and *post-representation* to an era of post-politics *per se*. This notion first emerged in the period following the end of the Cold War, which culminated in the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, a symbolic as well as a physical act of resistance and liberation. However, it remains relevant today and is perhaps more relevant than ever. But, rather than being conceived as a positive development, a number of philosophers including Jacques Rancière conceive post-politics as an unquestioning acceptance of capitalism and neoliberal market values as the organizing basis of society[36]. They argue that, far from being a new 'politics of consensus', the apparent peace and stability that has emerged following several decades of tension between the West and the former Soviet Union and Maoist China denotes an acquiescence and disguises a post-democracy in which government is reduced to administration and elites hold all power and influence. Thus, post-democracy and post-politics are largely synonymous and are terms that reflect the concerns and pessimism of our age.

Post-Society

Some go even further and warn of a world that is becoming *post-society*.

UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher infamously said in an interview with *Woman's Own* magazine at Number 10 Downing Street in 1987 that "there is no such thing as society". Far from a slip of the tongue, Baroness Thatcher repeated the phrase several times in the interview with Douglas Keay also saying: "Who is society? There is no such thing"[37]. Thatcher's argument was that people were "casting their problems on

society" and expecting the government to resolve them rather than "look to themselves first". While individual initiative and resilience are important, Thatcher's statement has been widely criticized as advocating individualism and absconding from the responsibilities of the state.

The neoliberal capitalist policies of governments then and since are seen to have eroded social and cultural capital that bond, bridge, and bolster – even make possible – human society. Pessimists predict that the promotion of individualism, criticized by Zygmunt Bauman in his notion of *liquid modernity*[38], and the privatization of assets and services are creating *post-society* – a world in which private interests dominate and survival is matter of every man and woman for themselves. Such doomsday prophesies may be extreme, but there is widespread concern that the fabric of a number of advanced societies is breaking down, evidenced by a widening gap between the one per cent and the 99 per cent[39], increasing disengagement by many from politics and civil society, and radicalization and extremism.

Post-media

The concerns of Habermas and many others about the ineffectiveness of media in providing a *public sphere* for information sharing, deliberation and debate as well as checks and balances on power[40], along with audience fragmentation and massive technological, economic, and structural changes that have occurred in media, have led some to speculate that we have entered a *post-media* world[41]. Leaders in advertising point out that 'consumers' today have internet search tools to directly access information from a range of sources and a range of 'ad blocking' tools available to them. Peer-to-peer is the most trusted communication.

Michael Kahn, CEO of Performics Worldwide, the global performance marketing arm of Publicis Media, says that online information seekers are increasingly averse to accepting pushed advertising and promotional content particularly on mobile devices which are fast becoming the most popular communications device. One study reported that almost 40% of people block digital advertising content and a further 42% say that they intend to do so in future[42].

In what Kahn more accurately terms a 'post-paid media' era, marketers advocate greater use of owned media such as Web sites, organization publications such as newsletters and reports, and even fully controlled digital publishing, along with social influencer strategies to generate social media comment[43]. This shift to owned and shared social media enabled by low-cost digital technology and the loss of 'gatekeepers'[44] includes what is called *native advertising*, described as "advertorial on steroids"[45]. Ethical concerns have been raised about such practices, as they are further examples of post-truth and a related development that is a focus of this paper.

Kahn also says that 'profiling' of individuals built from digital intelligence, data analytics and the techniques of psychographics, which enable personalization through identification of the interests, tastes, preferences, and habits of citizens who marketers like to narrowly describe as consumers, is the way of the future in marketing communication. However, the use of data analytics is rapidly progressing well beyond benign uses to identify citizens' interests and preferences. In 2017, *The Guardian* published a major exposé of how the 'Leave' campaign that led to *Brexit* and the Trump election campaign applied dystopian uses of surveillance, data mining and data analytics to manipulate public opinion[46]. *The Guardian* compared these to *psyops* (psychological operations) used in warfare.

Beyond the 'fake news'[47] announcements of any individual, these systematic developments are part of the "regime of post-truth" that Jayson Harsin discusses. This is not an anti-technology argument; rather it is a call to carefully consider how we use new communication technologies. They can be used to increase understanding and engagement, or they can be used for manipulation and predation.

Post-communication

At its core, a common element in all of these developments and predictions is communication – or, at least, what increasingly passes for communication in the public sphere today. Communication is central to media, to politics, to democracy, and to society. But a conclusion that can be drawn from critical analysis is that interaction in these spheres is increasingly characterized by *post-communication*.

The term *post-communication* was first used in 1966 by Robert Cathcart in a pioneering contemporary study of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism[48]. Cathcart identified and named as *post-communication* one-way, top-down persuasion and propaganda.

Echoing classical Greek and Roman oratory and writings of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, Cathcart describes rhetoric as "a communicator's intentional use of language and other symbols to influence or persuade selected receivers to act, believe, or feel the way the communicator desires".[49] His analysis of rhetoric suggests that the rhetor believes he or she knows best and is therefore justified in deploying all the powers of oratory, symbolism, and media technologies available to tell others how to think and behave.

While rhetorical criticism might sound like a refutation of rhetoric as it has been traditionally understood, Cathcart says its purpose is to examine how communication is accomplished and whether it is worthwhile. In other words, rhetorical criticism is predominantly a review of the effectiveness of communication in this somewhat uncritical view. That the user of rhetoric may *not* know best does not seem to come into it.

It should be noted that rhetorical criticism has since broadened and recent texts advocate that rhetoric can be balanced and productive by ensuring that 'both sides' of debates have the ability to present their case persuasively. Emeritus professor of communication Karen Foss acknowledges that rhetoric may be intended to persuade, but she says that it may also be an 'invitation to understanding' through two-way debate[50], which is referred to as *invitational* rhetoric as opposed to manipulative rhetoric[51]. Robert Heath has applied this argument to public relations in his *rhetorical theory of PR*[52], although many remain unconvinced that PR is about balanced discussion and interaction, as discussed in the following.

Like post-truth, *post-communication* does not simply refer to temporality – a subsequent period. Post-communication refers to a breakdown of communication; a collapse of its fundamental concepts and a disregard for and discarding of its key principles to the extent that all there is left is a pretence of communication.

The basis of such a claim is open to challenge. So, here it is important to consider some of the empirical findings from recent research. Three examples of key findings from the research studies referred to previously are discussed, from which a common thread can be identified.

Organization-centricity
A review of 30 models of evaluation used in various fields of public communication as well as analysis of more than 20 case studies, including award-winning PR and public communication campaigns, shows that public communication is carried out by organizations predominantly to achieve their pre-determined objectives with stakeholders and publics conceived as 'targets' for persuasion and mobilization. For example, examination of widely used models of evaluation found that in all but one the arrows denoting the flow of information and messages are one-way from the organization to 'target audiences' and the arrows denoting the flow of outcomes and impact to be evaluated are towards the organization and confined to its intended outcomes and impact. No evaluation models examined show a focus on mutual achievement of objectives or mutual benefits for organizations and their stakeholders.

Evaluation literature also illustrates and even accentuates this organization-centric approach. For instance, in a 2017 journal article, three leading US writers on PR evaluation note that public relations measurement should "focus on the ability of a communication program to deliver the foundation that allows business objectives to be achieved"[53]. This further narrows public communication to achieving the interests of 'business', reflecting a paradigmatic partitioning of PR in the service of capitalism and neoliberalism. The organization-centricity starkly evident in evaluation models fundamentally contradicts theories of PR as two-way, symmetrical, dialogic, and designed to achieve co-orientation and relationships. Publics are objects, not subjects, in the parsing of public relations.

The ambivalence and conflict revealed in evaluation of PR is further evident in the growing push for *strategic communication* to constitute an alternative approach, or subsume practices such as public relations, corporate communication, and public affairs. The concept of strategic communication has its merits as an integrating label to overcome the blurred boundaries, overlaps, and multifarious nomenclature of PR, corporate communication, public affairs, and so on, and as a broader approach to look beyond the narrow focus of 'PR' on media publicity[54]. It also potentially opens up a broader field of research including examination of questionable and unethical uses of public communication such as post-truth approaches, in place of the mostly normative research and theorizing of PR and corporate communication.

Building on the landmark 2007 paper by Kirk Hallahan and colleagues[55], scholars such as Cynthia King, Priscilla Murphy, and European researchers such as Jesper Falkheimer and Mats Heide have argued for a conceptualization of strategic communication as *participatory* with stakeholders[56], *networked*[57], and *emergent*[58]. This should be uncontroversial. As early as 1985, eminent business and management studies scholar Henry Mintzberg and co-authors argued that organizational strategy needed to progress from traditional top-down approaches to become adaptive and *emergent* taking account of the views of stakeholders and the environment[59]. More recently, change management lecturer at MIT and co-founder of the MITx u.lab, Otto Scharmer has advocated what he calls *Theory U* that argues for an about turn from top-down organization-centric approaches towards engagement, collective active, collaboration, and co-production[60]. Management theorists and consultants are also increasingly focussing on *adaptive systems theory* rather than basic systems theory that spawned one-way transmissional *mass communication* models. Architecture and many areas of business are embracing *design thinking*. Health communication has adopted a *social ecology* model[61] and a *culture-centred* approach[62] that emphasize sensitivity towards the social and cultural environment and engaging collaboratively with service users and other stakeholders.

However, despite efforts within public relations over the past decade to broaden understanding of strategic communication and despite significant developments in management theory, discussion of strategic communication remains organization-centric and open to description as *post-communication*. For example, a recent publication on communication strategy states narrowly: "communications need to serve the overall strategic goals of a company and help to fulfil its mission". (Note again the narrow focus on business interests.) The authors go further to argue for increased alignment of communication with organizational goals rather than a broader engagement and relationship-building role with stakeholders and publics[63] – a view also expressed in the *communication controlling* model of public communication[64]. As recently as a chapter in the upcoming *International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*, scholars say that strategic communication professionals are "charged with the support of organizational thinking and action around strategy"[65]. This leaves no room for counselling organizations to alter or change their thinking or actions; it puts PR and other forms of strategic communication entirely in the service of power. It shows the claim of 'boundary spanning' to be what Kant would call an "unwarranted pretension to merit"[66]. It renders claims of dialogue, engagement, and relationships hollow and unrealised.

Anti-social

Despite the underlying design of social media based on Web 2.0 as interactive and 'social', and considerable hype about concepts such as 'PR 2.0'[67], research inside organizations, which included observation rather than reliance on self-reporting surveys, found social media are predominantly used for distributing the messages of organizations. While there are signs of change, a one-way transmissional approach remains common in major corporations and government organizations even in 2016[68]. This confirms a trend across PR, business and politics identified by others including Don Wright and Michelle Hinson[69] [70], Prue Robson and Melanie James[71], and the Pew Research Center[72].

Organizations speaking without listening

The Organizational Listening Project has found that "organizations listen sporadically at best, often poorly, and sometimes not all"[73]. Communication is conceptualized by management in most organizations as distributing information and persuading others to accept the version of reality that the organization presents. On average, 80 per cent of all the resources devoted by organizations to communication including social and market research, public consultation, complaints processing, correspondence, stakeholder engagement, public relations, internal organizational communication, community relations, and social media is focussed on disseminating the organization's messages (i.e., speaking). In some organizations this is as high as 95 per cent.

When organizations do listen, it is predominantly instrumental – that is, it is done in order to gain insights that aid targeting of those referred to as audiences and consumers. Today, organizations gleefully talk about 'big data'. But it is not 'big data' as a source of understanding what people want and think; it is overwhelmingly an approach of using data for personalized and behavioural targeting to change what people want and think to align to what organizations want them to want and think.

There is also considerable evidence that listening is selective, such as public consultations and stakeholder engagement that listens to the 'usual suspects'. For example, politicians and governments argue that public input to their policies comes from the membership of their political parties. However, in the UK, the total membership of the three largest political parties today amounts to 1.6% of eligible voters. In the US, a 2013 Gallup poll found that 42% of Americans identified as 'independents' – a record high – and that support for both the Republican and Democrat Parties has fallen[74].

A conclusion of The Organizational Listening Project is that, in the name of communication, the practices of advertising, public relations and related fields such as corporate, government, and organizational communication have created an 'architecture of speaking' for organizations. If so-called communication professionals are to facilitate true communication including dialogue, they need to counter-balance the brutalist 'architecture of speaking' that these fields of practice have created with an *architecture of listening* – a set of principles, standards, and procedures for organizations to pay attention to, consider the views of, and be responsive to their stakeholders and publics – not always agreeing, but being open, dialogic, and at least prepared to adapt.

A top-down organization-centric approach in which public communication is put into the service of pre-determined organization strategy is anti-social and, by speaking and not listening, PR, corporate communication, strategic communication, or whatever one cares to call it, collapses into *post-communication*.

Who creates post-communication?

To a significant extent, the blame for the alarming developments that are referred to as *post-truth* can be laid at the feet of journalists and politicians. In his warning of the "eclipse of the public", John Dewey noted

that journalism, by claiming to speak in the public's name had in effect colonized the public sphere for debate and conversation[75].

The eminent American communication theorist James Carey elaborated on this, arguing that conversation and dialogue are central to human society. In his recent analysis of Carey's work, Jefferson Pooley summarized Carey's critique saying "journalists claimed to speak for – to represent – a public that they had, however, long since helped snuff out". In a criticism of American journalism, but which can be equally or even more justifiably applied to Britain's former 'Fleet Street' or my own country's cultural export, Rupert Murdoch, Pooley argued that "under the cloak of professional authority", journalists became increasingly remote and unresponsive to the public they presumed and purported to represent[76].

However, it is very easy to point one's finger at aberrant 'others'. A question that all public communication practitioners need to ask themselves is 'to what extent has the burgeoning and blurring field of public communication, including public relations as well advertising and social media use by organizations, contributed to the "regime of post-truth" and potentially to post-democracy or even post-society?

These developments are not simply the idiosyncrasies of one or a few contemporary P.T. Barnums[77]. The tendency to blame a few aberrant individuals or organizations rather than accept a need for change at the core was noted back in 1989 by Marvin Olasky, who referred to the "the doctrine of selective depravity, otherwise known as 'don't blame us, it's them – the immoral outsiders who cause the trouble'". Olasky pointed out that "blaming the periphery does not come to grips with the corruption that can be found at the centre of the public relations trade"[78].

This is not to suggest that public relations is corrupt in the legislative or criminal sense. Olasky was talking about a corruption of ideology and philosophy and how even the best intentions break down. Olasky framed his critique within Kuhn's notion of paradigms – broad ways of thinking or worldviews that frame and inform the specific theories we develop and the way we conceive practices. Kuhn's argument is that transformation in a field usually requires a new paradigm – stepping outside itself to discover a new way of thinking with a different perspective or vantage point.

There is no doubt that public relations has evolved considerably from the early days of press agentry and P.T. Barnum. From the pioneering work of Edward Bernays, practitioners were urged to provide strategic counsel to management and use social research – albeit Bernays maintained a Freudian focus on persuasion. Arthur Page stressed doing good, not just saying you're good. The Excellence Study advocated *two-way* communication and relationship-building to the extent of *symmetry* between organizations and their stakeholders and publics. The 'new rhetoric' of the late twentieth century championed the telling of organizations' stories, but also invited others to discuss and debate. This has been furthered in the important work on dialogue[79] and engagement in the twenty-first century, along with critical and emergent sociocultural perspectives[80] and   the 'strategic' turn that has emerged over the past decade, albeit somewhat problematically as discussed previously.

But the events of the past few years and the ongoing social, cultural, political and economic tensions that exist and appear to be escalating in industrialized developed nations suggest that the work of public communication theorists and practitioners is far from done.

This critical analysis leads then to a key question: What should be the locus and direction of future changes in public communication?

Rediscovering *communis* and *communicare*

This is an important issue for all those who practice public communication in some form because, as the eminent American philosopher, psychologist, and educator John Dewey said "society exists not only by … communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in … communication"[81]. In short, society is communication. Without communication, human society cannot exist. It stands to reason then, that in situations of weakened communication, society is fragile and unlikely to be civil or civic.

James Carey, similarly describes communication as culture – the very fabric of what makes society and what holds society together – and as the basis of reality. Carey said that "reality is brought into existence, is produced by, communication"[82]. Influential Birmingham School[83] scholar Raymond Williams also wrote effusively about the importance of communication in creating and sustaining communities and societies[84].

Dewey, Carey and others at the so-called 'Chicago School' of sociology[85] gave birth to American cultural studies that paralleled, but differed from British cultural studies. Whereas the UK cultural studies movement emanating from the University of Birmingham under the leadership of Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall had a political economy focus grounded in neomarxism, which was unacceptable in the USA, American cultural studies was influenced by American pragmatism as well as sociology and anthropology and developed along a different path.

An important contribution of American cultural studies is that it challenged the *scientism* of High Modernism that prevailed in 1960s America and rejected behaviourism and functionalism. It also sought to cut away the sharp edges of capitalism and advocated social responsibility in place of 'Robber Baron' and 'the public be damned attitudes'[86]. For a period, American intellectual thought joined with European scholarship such as the work of Clifford Geertz and Richard Rorty – although Americans could never go as far as agreeing with the French poststructuralists.

Departing from early transmissional thinking represented in Shannon and Weaver's *mathematical theory of communication*[87], David Berlo' source, message, channel, receiver (SMCR) model[88], and the propagandist thinking of Harold Lasswell[89] and Walter Lippmann[90] that spawned *mass communication* theory[91] [92], communication studies grew as a new field, carried on today by eminent scholars such as Robert Craig[93]. While recognizing the contribution of systems theory and psychology, the field expanded to include perspectives from sociology, anthropology, phenomenology, cultural studies and even critical theories. Qualitative dimensions gained attention in addition to quantitative metrics as ways of describing human experience.

However, there is increasing evidence that both the British and American cultural studies projects are dead. Perhaps it has been the collapse of affluent post-War society into economic uncertainty and the Global Financial Crisis early in the new Millennium with the resulting resurgence of unemployment and negative net income growth. Perhaps it has been the uncertainty caused by mass migrations and terrorism. Perhaps it is simply the ageing of the population in developed Western societies and a retreat into conservatism.

As a result, and contrary to claims that we are living in a postmodern world, we are seeing a resurgence of High Modernist thinking, or what Anthony Giddens calls 'late modernity'[94]. Even further, the French philosopher Giles Lipovetsky says we are living in the age of *hypermodernity*[95] – an age of focus on individualism as Bauman predicted and hyper-consumption as the mode of living, identity-construction, and self-actualization. In communication, this translates to a refocussing on functionalism and behaviourism. In this worldview, public communication is primarily conducted to promote consumption of products and services and manipulate citizens into compliance or acquiescence to the wishes of corporations or governments or other types of organizations. In short, *post-communication*.

There is an urgent imperative for those engaged in public communication to reflect that the origins and foundations of human communication are found in the Latin noun *communis* meaning community or commonness and the Latin verb *communicare* meaning to create or build. Transmission of messages is not communication. There is no such thing as one-way communication. Communication is by definition a *two-way* interactive process aimed, not only at persuasion, but at coming together to share meaning and understanding – not necessarily agreement, but understanding, accommodation, adaptation, co-orientation.

Well beyond and long before PR theory evolved, the key concepts and principles of human communication were lucidly spelled out in the philosophies of Mikhail Bakhtin[96] and Martin Buber[97], who emphasized *dialogue*, as well as in the work of Hans Georg Gadamer[98] who stressed the importance 'openness to the other' in a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity[99]. Also, contemporary public communication scholars and practitioners could do no better than look to the work of John Dewey, James Carey and the retrospectively named 'Chicago School' of sociologists and cultural studies scholars from which human communication studies emerged, rather than the journalism, mass communication and speech communication theories that form the foundation of contemporary public relations, particularly in North America.

This is not to support the misguided notion that communication can solve all social and political problems. John Durham Peters says poetically: "That we can never communicate like the angels is a tragic fact, but also a blessed one". He says communication, in all its fractures and mediations, is what makes us human[100]. The simple, inescapable, and essential facts in relation to public as well as interpersonal communication are:

1. Communication often does not work. As George Bernard Shaw is alleged to have said, the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place[101]; and
2. Communication is often, and increasingly it seems, used to misinform, mislead, and manipulate.

Post-communication not a new phenomenon. As noted previously, Robert Cathcart described manipulative rhetoric as post-communication in 1966. The existentialist philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960) lamented that "dialogue and personal relations have been replaced by propaganda or polemic".[102] Carey warned in 1989 that "language – the fundamental medium of human life – is increasingly defined as an instrument for manipulating objects".

However, while such practices have long existed, today *post-communication* is expanding to new levels of sophistication and reach through digital technologies such as 'big data' analytics, behavioural targeting, the use of 'bots', click bait, new forms of sponsored content, and unfettered social media access in the 24/7 global mediasphere of the internet.

The recommendation of this analysis is that those who work in public communication in all its forms need to look to the locus of the discipline and rail against *post-communication*. In the very least, public communicators should ensure that they are not part of it. Professional communicators need to resist being sucked into the fog of post-truth politics, the hype of behavioural targeting in marketing, and the spinning vortex of data analytics in which people are not citizens or customers or employees, but objects to be categorized, coerced and controlled.

This call for change is based not only on ethical grounds, but on pragmatic grounds, pointing out that audience agency is increasingly more than private choices and silent protest. As shown in recent events, the public is not eclipsed as John Dewey lamented[103]; publics are rejecting, repelling, and rebelling.

So, a final question if one agrees to any extent with the arguments presented, is how to transform public communication?

Future directions – Reparsing public relations

As Kuhn argued, one of the routes to transformation and innovation is stepping outside one's field to look at problems and challenges from another vantage point. *Transdisciplinarity* is increasingly advocated by scholars to step beyond *multidisciplinarity*, which presents the views of two or more disciplines in parallel or contrast, and *interdisciplinarity*, which integrates elements of two or more disciplines, to a collaborative approach in which scholars and sometimes practitioners (a) combine their knowledge to work on a common problem and (b) develop new knowledge beyond that of the disciplines involved[104] [105]. Transdisciplinarity is challenging because, whereas multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity work within common conceptual frameworks and share analytical methods, transdisciplinarity includes collaboration and even collision between quite different paradigms, theoretical frameworks, and research methods. But therein lies its productive potential to produce new understandings and previously unforeseen perspectives.

In a 2015 critical article on PR theory in *Public Relations Inquiry*, Lisa Dühring from the University of Leipzig argued against what she called "the constant broadening and fragmentation of the field, occupying terrain from neighbouring disciplines"[106]. She was critical of the dominance of Excellence theory, but also condemned, in her words, "the eclecticism with which PR researchers … borrow and adopt concepts from other disciplines"[107].

To the contrary, this author argues that public relations has insufficiently engaged with communication studies despite the centrality of communication to PR. In its pursuit of *scientific* credibility, it also has overlooked many of the deep insights of the humanities, and, while seeking a seat at the management table, it seems to be insufficiently informed of latest thinking in management and leadership studies. For examples, while Dühring was not opposing transdisciplinarity, she argued for "scientific progress". This in itself confines communication to what science can explain. As recognized in design thinking, not everything about human communication is scientific. Humans march to the rhythm of the humanities as much or more than positivist science. As has been demonstrated clearly in *Brexit*, the Trump election, the Scotland push for independence, and rising opposition to immigration in many countries, communication and the shaping of attitudes and behaviour involves emotions, aesthetics, beliefs including spiritual and religious frameworks, moral values, the influence of tradition, and many other factors.

As well as drawing on science such as systems theory and social sciences such as psychology, public communication disciplines need greater transdisciplinary engagement with contemporary sociology; social and cultural anthropology; democratic political theory; cultural studies; feminist studies; critical theory; phenomenology, particularly *hermeneutics*; and public diplomacy, particularly the new public diplomacy.

Lest this be seen as academic and altruistic, it is salutary and somewhat concerning that management, which many public communication professionals claim or aspire to serve, is already actively discussing a U-turn to re-engage with stakeholders and publics in collaborative approaches focussed on mutual benefit and sustainability. Design thinking and creative intelligence and innovation strategies seek to actively engage in co-production and partnerships. Firms such as McKinsey, KPMG, PriceWaterhouseCoopers and Deloittes are at the forefront of these approaches.

A continuation of public communication based on one-way transmission of messages and organization-centric objectives will result in the field and practices such as public relations becoming increasingly siloed and a 'scholarly ghetto'. On the other hand, opportunities to contribute to the essential lifeblood of society and an effective inclusive public sphere abound.

Conclusion

In conclusion, drawing on a body of research, this paper has presented three main propositions.

1. The crisis of trust facing governments, business, and even NGOs and non-profit organizations today and a growing backlash from many sectors of society is, in significant part, the results of a collapse of public communication, which is the lifeblood of the public sphere, into *post-communication* – one-way, top-down persuasion, propaganda and 'spin' designed to manipulate and coerce audiences into compliance and acquiescence, rather than dialogue, debate, and negotiation.
2. *Post-communication* is caused by (a) organization-centricity; (b) *hypermodernist* philosophies grounded in neoliberalism and consumerism in which people are primarily conceptualized as consumers rather than as producers or citizens; and (c) a lack of active, responsive listening[108] to the needs, interests, and concerns of stakeholders including customers, employees, communities and citizens generally.
3. Recent rejections of the messages and campaigns of power elites indicate that new approaches in public communication are needed. While technologies and techniques such as data analytics and behavioural insights, used ethically, can play an important role in public communication, exploitive and manipulative techniques based on 'big data' mining and analysis, digital intelligence, and behavioural targeting, which are advocated as the way of the future by some[109], will only exacerbate resistance and negate perceived benefits of these techniques and technologies. Public communication requires humanistic as well as scientific thinking, making greater use of transdisciplinary knowledge in the humanities and aligning public communication to progressive and emergent management theory.

Whether Otto Scharmer's Theory U is an appropriate framework for rethinking public relations and public communication broadly is open to debate. But it calls attention to a need for a significant change of direction, if not a U-turn, from one-way, top-down, organization-centric, transmissional approaches.

Recently, at an Arthur Page Insight Forum, the president of the Arthur Page Society, Roger Bolton, acknowledged that "we live in a world that is more connected than ever, yet somehow more fractured and tribalized". The event was told that "today … CEO's are increasingly focused on their company's societal purpose and engaging in community causes while the public are looking to business to speak out on social issues". A cadre of progressive chief communication officers (CCOs) are at their side in this transition. But whether public communication professionals at large contribute to this transition, or to *post-communication*, is a question mark and a gauntlet that has been thrown down for communicators in both the private and public sectors.

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107 Ibid, p. 19.

108 Organizational listening is defined as giving recognition to being *open* to others' views; *acknowledgement* of others' expressions of voice; paying *attention* to what is said; *interpreting* what others say to gain *understanding*;

giving *consideration* to what is said; and *responding* in some appropriate way. Response does not necessarily involve agreement. See Macnamara, 2016, pp. 41–43; 2017, pp. 21–22.

[109] Cambridge Analytica (https://cambridgeanalytica.org) is a private company that uses sophisticated data mining and analysis to inform strategic communication, particularly in election campaigns. Wikipedia reports that the firm used its techniques in the Donald Trump presidential campaign and the Leave.EU campaign, which is the subject of controversy and investigations in both countries (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Analytica).

Reference:

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