Challenging *post-communication*: Beyond focus on a 'few bad apples' to multi-level public communication reform

Jim Macnamara
University of Technology Sydney

Since declaration of *post-truth* as Oxford Dictionaries' word of the year in 2016, studies show that 'fake news', 'alternative facts', and disinformation have continued unabated—and even increased. Fingers have pointed at individuals such as Donald Trump and the activities of Russian 'troll farms'. Also, global outrage has risen in relation to the deceptive and manipulative practices of organisations such as Cambridge Analytica and social media oligopolies, notably Facebook. However, transdisciplinary research challenges the 'few bad apples' argument and proposes that a wide range of culprits are responsible for what this study calls *post-communication*. Based on review of reports and commentary related to public communication practices, and key informant interviews, this discussion proposes that reforms are required at three levels: top-down, such as updated regulation and legislation; bottom-up, including new approaches to media literacy; and increased attention to ethics and standards by those in the middle of the post-truth phenomenon—professionals in advertising, marketing, public relations, government and political communication, and journalism.

Post-truth, disinformation, deception and manipulation in communication

Since the Oxford Dictionaries pronounced 'post-truth' as its word of the year in 2016, a number of studies and analyses have warned that misinformation and disinformation, often euphemistically referred to as 'fake news' and 'alternate facts', have proliferated and are damaging democracy and the fabric of many societies (e.g., Davis, 2019; McIntyre, 2018). A number of others have warned that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are being used extensively to deceive and manipulate people (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

While it must be recognised that disinformation as well as misinformation, deception, and manipulation have been present throughout human history, there is evidence that the information and communication technologies (ICTs) of the twenty-first century present new unprecedented challenges as well as opportunities in public communication. These technologies notably include social media platforms; data mining and analytics tools; and an increasing array of applications and systems powered by artificial intelligence (AI).

Regulators, ethicists, social and political scientists, and media and communication researchers are seeking solutions to the problems of fake news, alternative facts, disinformation, and related deception and manipulation in public communication that is an essential enabler of the public sphere. Some call for regulation or legislation up to and including anti-trust action against the new media monopolies and oligopolies such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon. Others engage in finger pointing at individuals such as Donald Trump or foreign states. A few put their faith in fact-checking organisations.

In this discussion, based on review of reports and commentary related to public communication practices and interviews with senior professionals and researchers in journalism, advertising, marketing, public relations (PR), and government and political communication, it is argued that what is referred to here as *post-communication* has myriad culprits and necessitates a range of strategies at all levels of society. In particular, the spotlight is turned on the public communication practices used by business and government, including advertising, marketing, public relations (PR), and political communication. While there is a body of critical literature in relation to these fields of practice, this study revealed industry

leaders relishing and even openly gloating of how consumers can be increasingly targeted and manipulated with new technologies, and leaders of communication industry organisations acknowledged that more ethical and socially responsible practices are required.

The practices of social media platforms in relation to content moderation and data collection and use are not excused. But the study further argues that users are not always innocent victims, instead often acting as 'lazy organisms' (McGuire, 1969) uncritically accepting and sharing disinformation and deceptive and manipulative information, or simply 'turning a blind eye' to falsehoods.

This analysis is drawn from a two-year study undertaken to inform a research monograph. This article provides a synthesis of the main overall findings with examples in three areas of public communication, and proposes a multi-level approach to re-establish ethical, truthful communication, which is identified as necessary for an effective public sphere (Habermas, 2006) and civilised human society (Carey, 1989; Dewey, 1916).

Theories, concepts, and definitions that frame this analysis

This analysis is broadly framed within and by theories of human communication and its role in society. As Dewey noted, 'society exists … in communication' (1916, p. 5). Carey's definition of communication as 'a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed' (1989, p. 23) also speaks to the importance of communication in shaping, maintaining, and improving human society. In such statements, Dewey and Carey were speaking about public rather than interpersonal communication that, while important, is limited to dyadic and small group interactions.

A large body of literature argues that it is important that public communication through media and other public fora should be truthful and ethical rather than deceptive and manipulative (e.g., Couldry, 2012; Fawkes, 2015). Craig (2018) calls for 'deliberation on the normative' as well as technical aspects of communication (p. 289) and argues that it is 'imperative to improve communication and to disseminate better communication practices' (p. 290). This discussion suggests that this has never been more important.

The public sphere, spheres, and sphericles
More specifically, this analysis is grounded in the notion of the public sphere, although it uses this term more broadly than that discussed by Habermas (2006) and others who have focussed on the mostly mediated space, or spaces, for becoming informed and engaging in rational debate in relation to democratic politics. Others identify multiple public spheres, or public *sphericles* (Fraser, 1992), focussed on a range of issues such as the environment and public health, including health misinformation (Caulfield et al., 2019). These and the numerous other studies in relation to the public sphere, particularly the role of media and the internet (Garnham, 1992; Papacharissi, 2002), and Bimber and de Zuñiga's (2020) notion of the 'unedited public sphere', are relevant to this discussion.

Public communication
Public communication can be broadly defined as direct and mediated human communication that takes place in the public sphere for political, social, cultural, or commercial purposes. More specifically, public communication involves practices such as journalism, media advertising, marketing communication such as electronic direct mail (eDM), PR, and corporate, government, and political communication.

Public communication is big business today. For example, global spending on advertising exceeded US$630 billion in 2018, and is forecast to increase to more than US$750 billion by 2021 (Statista, 2019). Spending on PR is also growing, increasing by 34% between 2013 and 2016 in the UK alone (Public Relations Consultants Association, 2017). In the United States

an annual study by the University of Southern California, Annenberg (2018) reported that 86% of PR firms predicted revenue growth in 2018, with half forecasting growth of 15% or more. Even more is spent on practices referred to as corporate communication, public affairs, and organisational communication.

Ironically, at a time of growing investment in public communication, public trust in major institutions is declining. The 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer survey of more than 30,000 people in almost 30 countries reported that less than 40% of the population trust government in many countries including the USA (39%) and the UK (36%). Just over one third (35%) of people trust media in the UK; less than half of the population trust media in the USA; and only around half trust business and non-government organisations on average (Edelman, 2020, pp. 39–42). This signals that something is wrong in public communication—the ensemble of practices that are designed to foster shared meanings, positive relationships, and community.

Fake news, alternative facts, misinformation, and disinformation
The term 'fake news' was popularised in 2016, notably in relation to statements by Donald Trump, along with 'alternative facts' (Schudson & Zelizer, 2017, p. 1). However, researchers have observed that the term fake news is 'woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of mis- and dis-information' and say that 'an absence of definitional rigor' has resulted in a failure to recognise the diversity and seriousness of misinformation and disinformation (Derakhshan & Wardle, 2017, p. 6). It is important to unpack these terms to understand important differences in relation to motive and outcome.

While misinformation can and often does occur accidentally, and may or may not cause harm, Derakhshan and Wardle define disinformation as 'information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country' (2017, p. 9). Similarly, in its *Counter Disinformation Toolkit*, the UK government defines disinformation as 'the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain' (Government Communication Service, 2019). The common thread in these definitions is that disinformation is intentional and it is designed to cause harm.

It might be asked why people do not simply reject disinformation, given its potential for harm. The answer lays in two other key characteristics of disinformation: (1) it is mostly distributed in deceptive and manipulative ways such that many mistake it for information; and (2) an enduring and misguided belief that the sources are aberrant outliers in society—a 'few bad apples' that are not representative of, or common, in mainstream society.

The doctrine of selective depravity—the 'few bad apples' argument
Underestimation of the problem, and common defensive responses by those involved in advertising, marketing, public relations, and government and political communication, result from application of the *doctrine of selective depravity*—commonly referred to as the 'few bad apples' argument. This is one of three theological conceptualisations of the nature of human kind. At the poles of this theological trio are belief in 'man's *natural goodness*' [gendered term in original], contrasted by the doctrine of *total depravity* based on the notion that humans are born with original sin and can only be saved by adherence to religious rituals such as prayer (Rushdoony, 2016). The middle-ground philosophy is that a select few are bad actors. The rest of us are OK, so we can continue as we always have. As theologian, R. J. Rushdoony (2016) says: 'By isolating depravity in a particular class, race, or group, it implicitly locates virtue in all others, particularly in the defining group' (para. 11). The application of this view to practice is illustrated in a discussion of the dysfunctions of PR in which Olasky (1989) described the response of leaders and organisations in the field as 'don't blame us, it's them—the immoral outsiders who cause the trouble' (p. 88).

It is true that systematic and sinister disinformation campaigns are being conducted by hostile states as part of political warfare, as discussed in a 2019 report by the RAND Corporation (Mazarr et al., 2019, p. ix). However, this analysis identifies perpetrators much closer to home in the professionalised practices of advertising, marketing, PR, political and government communication, and in journalism, increasingly in concert with ICT companies and their technologies.

Public communication to 'post-communication'

The term 'post-communication' was used in 1966 as the title of a study of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism by Robert Cathcart (1981). Cathcart described 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' (1981, p. 2). Other studies note that rhetoric can be 'invitational' (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 2) for multiple speakers to exchange views in dialogue and debate, or 'manipulative' (Heath, 2006, p. 95). Cathcart's definition tends towards the latter, as it describes one-way persuasion. Furthermore, his use of the term post-communication narrowly refers to retrospective reflection, analysis, and evaluation to identify ways to make rhetoric more effective in persuading others to act, believe, or feel the way the communicator desires. Such definitions and discussion reduce communication to one-way persuasion that, when taken to extremes, leads to propaganda and exploitive manipulation.

This analysis repurposes the term post-communication, not as a simple temporal transition compared with an earlier idealised period or mythical golden age, but as an evolution in which the principles, properties, and characteristics that are traditionally identified with communication are superseded and replaced by antithetical features. As in many uses of the prefix 'post', this signifies a deterioration or even a collapse of public communication from its normative purpose of informing, meaning making, and creating understanding to disinformation, deception, and manipulation. As McIntyre (2018) says in relation to the term post-truth, the prefix post is not meant simply to indicate that we have evolved 'past' the following noun in chronological terms, but that the noun (the named thing) 'has been eclipsed—that it is irrelevant' (p. 5). Even if contemporary societies have not yet reached a state of post-truth, there is substantial 'truth decay' (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018), which shows signs of continuing to undermine the public sphere and public trust without appropriate intervention.

Research questions

Four inter-related research questions were explored in this study as follows.

1. To what extent are disinformation and deceptive and manipulative public communication seen as major threats to be addressed, or are these contemporary manifestations of what has occurred throughout human history? (*What is the extent of the problem?*)
2. To what extent are new information and communication technologies such as data analytics, algorithms, bots, and artificial intelligence (AI) seen as exacerbating or able to redress disinformation and deceptive and manipulative public communication? (*Will technology provide solutions or exacerbate the problem?*)
3. To what extent are disinformation and deceptive and manipulative public communication seen to be the work of a few individuals and groups, or are the causes more widespread? (*Who is mainly responsible for the problem?*)
4. What, if anything, do media and communication researchers and professionals believe should be done, and by whom, to protect people against disinformation and deceptive and manipulative public communication? (*What should be done by whom?*)

Methodology

The research questions were investigated within a constructivist, also referred to as the interpretivist, approach using qualitative methods (Bryman, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The findings and conclusions were informed by primary and secondary research using informal content analysis and formal research through in-depth interviews.

Methods

In the first instance, a review of reports and commentary related to public communication practices was undertaken, sourced from academic research literature and popular and professional media, including blogs discussing public communication. The review identified issues prominently discussed in relation to advertising, marketing, public relations, government and political communication, and journalism, and recent use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in these practices. The review provided anecdotal evidence to aid exploration of whether claims of misinformation, disinformation, deception, and manipulation are confined to a 'few bad apples' and exceptions to the rule, as often claimed, or whether they are more common and widespread, and it identified issues for exploration in interviews with industry leaders. Reports and commentary were sourced online using neutral keywords including 'public relations'; 'marketing'; 'political communication'; 'political campaigns'; 'big data'; 'bots'; 'algorithms'; and AI'. In addition, searches were conducted for 'misinformation'; 'disinformation'; 'spin'; and 'propaganda'. The population of academic papers, reports, and articles on these topics is vast—in the tens of millions, sometimes with thousands of articles about the same issue or case study. From the searches, 100 of the most frequently cited and most highly ranked topics were selected for further exploration.

Primary research involved 30 in-depth interviews with senior researchers and practitioners involved in public communication. Two-thirds of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, or had a face-to-face stage. To explain, a *deliberative* approach to interviewing was used, involving several stages. In the first stage, an information sheet describing the research objectives and listing the overarching research questions, as reported below, was sent to participants along with an e-questionnaire. The e-questionnaire contained check boxes to select and rank issues of interest as well as text boxes for participants to type comments in response to open-ended questions. The issues listed with check boxes were those that are widely discussed in the literature. The questionnaire was not used as a quantitative survey, but to (1) gain initial indications of the main issues of interest or concern and related views of participants and (2) to prompt participants to 'collect their thoughts' on the issues identified. In the second stage, participants were engaged in an open-ended interview in person or via Skype in which the issues and responses provided in the e-questionnaire were explored further and additional information was obtained spontaneously and through probing questions. In the third stage, a transcript of comments to be used in the research was returned to participants to check its accuracy and give participants the opportunity to confirm, modify, or expand their views based on reflection. In a number of cases, participants provided clarifications or additional comments via e-mail as part of an interactive 'conversational' process of interrogation and discussion.

Deliberative approaches to research, as well as consultation, recognise that participants often need time to think about the issues to be discussed beforehand and, therefore, seek to engage them in deliberation on the issues under discussion rather than collect 'off the top of the head' responses as often occurs in single shot interviews and surveys. Thus, this research drew on the techniques of deliberative polling and deliberative surveys (Fishkin, Luskin, & Jowell, 2000), applied in this instance in qualitative research. This three-stage approach in

interviewing was used to optimise *credibility* and *trustworthiness* of the research—factors that establish validity in qualitative studies (Shenton (2004).

Interview sample

The sample of interviewees was purposively selected from among senior practitioners and academic researchers prominent in journalism, advertising, marketing, PR, and government and political communication because of the inter-relationship of these practices in the public communication ecosystem. Participants in the study were selected from Australia, Europe including the UK, and the USA. Names were collected from lists of widely published authors in relevant fields; senior executives in professional associations representing practices such as advertising and PR; and senior practitioners in media, communication agencies, and fact checking organisations. Around 50% of interviewees requested de-identification of themselves and their organisation in consent forms provided, due to sensitivities in the issues discussed. However, the study gained attributable comments and information from senior executives in a number of major media and communication organisations. These included the world's largest advertising, PR, and research group, WPP (https://www.wpp.com); the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) (https://amecorg.com); the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (https://www.globalalliancepr.org), a global federation of national PR organisations; the global media verification and collaborative investigation network First Draft (https://firstdraftnews.org); and a number of national communication and PR industry organisations, such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the UK and the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in the USA. Unnamed comments were also gained from a former president of the American Academy of Advertising (https://www.aaasite.org).

Data analysis

The conduct of interviews in three stages including use of an e-questionnaire with a number of open-ended as well as closed-ended questions and follow-up discussions via e-mail resulted in considerable information from participants being received as text. Face-to-face and Skype interviews were recorded as notes rather than full transcripts. This was considered reliable as well as expeditious because comments used in the research were returned to participants for checking and correction if required.

Textual data received in returned questionnaires and e-mails, as well as notes recorded during face-to-face and Skype interviews and confirmed by participants, were categorised thematically based on manual coding using word and phrase matching. This identified the issues of most concern among participants and the most frequently proposed solutions. See Tables 1 and 2 in which these are listed and ranked by number of mentions as the first stage of data analysis. These topics were then used to inform critical interpretive analysis in which interviewees' perceptions and proposals were compared with academic research findings and case studies of practice reported in the literature.

Findings 1: What reports and commentary say about practices

While the research project explored a wide range of public communication practices, examples in three fields of practice are discussed in the following. While selective, these suggest that disinformation, deception, and manipulation are systematically perpetrated within established and professionalised public communication practices, not simply a result of the activities of social media platforms and a few aberrant individuals, thus providing concerning insights in relation to RQ3.

Public relations – 'Spin', 'merchants of doubt', and 'astroturfing'

The pejorative term 'spin', which alludes to fabrication, originated in relation to statements by politicians (Esser, 2008, p. 4785), but has progressively been applied broadly to political, corporate, and government communication, and the practice of PR, with practitioners frequently referred to as 'spin doctors' (Andrews, 2006). Edward Bernays, cited by many as the 'father of public relations' (Guth & Marsh, 2007, p. 70) also has been described as the 'father of spin' (Tye, 1998). Many reject such criticisms of PR and related practices such as corporate communication, but the following examples and comments by interviewees reveal a Jungian shadow cast by this field of practice across contemporary society.

Beyond Bernays' infamous promotion of cigarette smoking among women as 'torches of freedom' to appeal to the rising sentiment of women's liberation in the late 1920s (Amos & Haglund, 2000), PR has been directly and prominently involved in covering up the dangers of smoking tobacco, asbestos, sugar, and continues today in climate change denial. For example, four and a half decades of disinformation about the link between smoking and lung cancer began at a summit in New York City in 1953 at which John Hill, one of the founders of the global PR firm Hill & Knowlton, proposed a 'fight the science with alternative science' approach by sponsoring additional research. 'Big Tobacco' CEOs signed up to Hill's plan to establish the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC) that, over the following 45 years, produced and distributed pseudo-science, until the campaign collapsed under the weight of evidence and the tobacco companies were forced to pay out US$200 billion in lawsuits (McIntyre, 2018, p. 23).

In the 1960s, the sugar industry paid scientists to conduct research that downplayed or disguised the negative impacts of sugar on human health, which was 'boosted' by PR and marketing practitioners working for the processed food industry, who even today campaign against proposals for a sugar tax to combat the epidemic of obesity in developed countries.

In the 1990s and into the current millennium, 'Big Oil' emulated the tactics of 'Big Tobacco' through the creation and campaigning of lobby groups such as the American Petroleum Institute (API). A report claims that between 2002 and 2010 a corporate network of billionaires involved in manufacturing, refining, and distribution of petroleum and chemicals, contributed US$118 million towards 102 interest groups to discredit the science of climate change (Goldenberg, 2013, para. 10). Groups such as the TIRC and the API operate as what Oreskes and Conway (2010) call 'merchants of doubt' and the formation of such front groups is often referred to as *astroturfing*—a term derived from the artificial turf first used at the Astrodome in Houston, Texas.

One of the worst examples of spin and disinformation of all time may well be the claim that justified and the second Iraq war—that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and constituted a threat to its neighbouring countries and regional security. The alleged intelligence used to gain congressional, parliamentary, and public support for the 2003 military invasion of Iraq was found by a subsequent inquiry to have been 'sexed up' (Davies, 2009, p. 199) by aides to UK Prime Minister Tony Blair including director of communication Alistair Campbell.

It might be argued that these cases are ancient history and that communication practices have changed in corporations and government. These examples are noted, along with the following, to show a systemic and ongoing pattern in practice. Recent case studies show that disinformation, deception, and manipulation continue unabated within the heart of the media and communication industries and with connections to the highest levels of government and institutions including the offices of prime ministers, presidents, and the British Royal Family.

One of the largest and most prominent PR firms in the UK, Bell Pottinger, went into administration in September 2017 and subsequently collapsed following revelations of its disinformation campaigns and promotional activities for a corrupt South African regime. The firm, co-founded by Lord Tim Bell, a former PR adviser to UK Prime Minister Margaret

Thatcher, was described by the *New York Times* as a 'PR firm for despots and rogues'. The *Times* noted that:

> During its 30 years in the upper echelons of Britain's spin doctoring game, it sought to polish the image of dictators (Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus), repressive regimes (Bahrain and Egypt, to name two) and celebrities accused of despicable crimes (the Olympic runner Oscar Pistorius after he was charged with murder). (Segal, 2018, para. 2)

UK consultant specialising in risk and reputation management, Ella Minty, says that this example is far from atypical. She wrote in her blog *Power & Influence*:

> Bell Pottinger is hardly alone in this ethical quagmire. The destabilising power of those who are very good at what they do (whether we like it or not) in the world of PR and comms has never been so strong nor their reach so high. (Minty, 2019, para 19)

In 2019 the *New York Times* revealed how the high-profile US financier Jeffrey Epstein, after getting out of jail for sex offences in 2009, rehabilitated his reputation and career, before being charged with further offences relating to sex trafficking of underage girls in July 2019. Epstein gained fame in the decade from 2009 to 2019 through extensive media publicity, including profiles in *Forbes*, *The National Review*, and *HuffPost* that promoted him as a titan of business, as well as through websites alleging he was a philanthropist and benefactor and through connections to Prince Andrew, eighth in line to the British throne. However, is was subsequently revealed that the media articles were produced by a PR firm employed by Epstein, which not only wrote the articles but paid a reporter to attach his by-line and submit them as independent news (Kitterman, 2019). This case of paid media content illustrates that mainstream journalism is often complicit in disinformation. It also illustrates a lack of ethics within some sectors of the PR industry.[1]

While recent focus has been on social media platforms such as Facebook, particularly its interactions with the defunct data analysis firm Cambridge Analytica, PR scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Lee Edwards, recently warned of much wider dissemination of disinformation by professional communicators. She wrote: 'In societies soaked in promotional culture, Cambridge Analytica's work is the thin end of the wedge that industries such as PR, advertising, and marketing have managed to insert into all areas of our lives' (2018, para. 2). Edwards went on:

> The origins of the current scandal lie not in lax oversight by Facebook, or in the amorality of Cambridge Analytica and its clients, but in the histories of promotional industries that have normalised the idea of manipulation in their professional practice, while marginalising ethics and the public interest. (Edwards, 2018, para. 6)

While some might argue that this has been known for years, Edwards makes the point that little or nothing is being done about it. She concluded that 'one might expect the promotional industries to be doing a bit of soul-searching'. But she lamented that 'a search of industry association websites reveals precious little comment' other than placing blame 'squarely on the shoulders of tech companies' (2018, para. 7).

Some industry leaders publicly agree. Despite the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) having codes of practice and a Royal Charter that gives the CIPR the power to censure members, its president Sarah Hall was confessional at a PR conference in Europe in 2018. She said: 'I'd like us to first think about what kind of threshold we set our ourselves for professional conduct and ask whether it isn't, frankly, quite low' (Hall, 2018, para. 5). The CIPR's approach to self-regulation is explored further in interviews reported later.

Advertising – 'Going native', paid influencers, and 'merged media'

To combat audience resistance to traditional media advertising through 'ad blocking' techniques and declining effectiveness because of *persuasion knowledge* (Friestad & Wright, 1994), advertisers have turned to what is termed 'native advertising'—also referred to as sponsored content, brand placement, and embedded marketing. This involves the embedding of promotional messages in what purports to be independent editorial content. While product placement has been commonplace for many decades, particularly in movies, native advertising is more extensive and more furtively designed to 'hide the truth' and deceive media consumers (de Pelsmacker & Neijens, 2012, p. 1).

Major PR firms as well as advertising agencies have been quick to jump on the trend. In 2013, the New York head office of the world's largest PR consultancy, Edelman, issued a report that acknowledged ethical concerns about sponsored content. However, Edelman went on to report that the agency was 'teaming up with the advertising arm of publishers on sponsored content partnerships', which it noted are also referred to as 'paid content' or 'native advertising' (Edelman, 2013, p. 2).

Despite recent scrutiny by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the UK media regulator Ofcom, the latter identified native advertising as the third largest source of online advertising revenue after video and banners, responsible for more than £1 billion (US$1.2 billion) in advertising spend in 2017. Other forms of sponsored content generated a further £124 million (US$150 million) in advertising revenue (Ofcom, 2018, p. 78).

Along with native advertising, concerns are increasingly expressed in relation to the marketing and promotion activities of so-called *influencers* online, a relatively recent phenomenon in which social media users generate a large number of followers, often artificially by using bots as followers, and then promote products and services in return for undeclared remuneration. Advertising and PR firms increasingly seek out and pay online influencers as part of their campaigns.

A study by a team of researchers at the University of Glasgow found that just one in nine bloggers writing about weight management and diet provided accurate information. The study reported that only one of the leading social media writers on diet and weight management was a qualified nutritionist and that most distribute misinformation or disinformation (Sabbagh, 2019). The lead researcher Christina Sabbagh described the public communication of these influencers as not only misleading, but as 'potentially harmful' (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2019, para. 2).

So-called native advertising and paid influencers are examples of what one interviewee calls 'merged media', as discussed in the following section reporting the findings of interviews with industry leaders.

ComTech – 'Big data', bots, algorithms, and AI

In *The Costs of Connection*, Couldry and Mejias argue that, while 24/7 global connectivity has brought benefits to people, the cost of connection through communications technology (ComTech) is high. They claim that contemporary digital societies are victims of *data colonialism*, which they identify as an emerging order in which digital tools extract and use human data in ways that appropriate human life for profit, similar to previous exploitations such as slavery that extracted labour for profit. There are also rising concerns about invasion of privacy to support targeted marketing and McKinsey has warned that bots and artificial intelligence (AI) can 'bake in and scale bias' (Silberg & Manyika, 2019, para. 4), leading to social inequities and injustices.

However, industry literature indicates that practitioners are rarely reflecting critically or through a *corporate social responsibility* lens on the use of new technologies. Despite warnings, marketing literature reveals a headlong rush into AI with little thought other than

how to serve corporate interests. For instance, the marketing director of what claims to be the largest independent marketing company in the world stated online that 'artificial intelligence is the future of marketing', giving the example that 'soon … consumer engagement will be run by AI bots' (Tjepkema, 2019, paras 16–17).

Clea Bourne from Goldsmiths has accused the PR industry of 'myopia' in relation to AI as well, which she says is narrowly framed to serve '21st century neoliberal capitalism' (Bourne, 2019, p. 109). For example, a 2019 blog post on the UK Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) website welcomed AI in the following terms.

> We have nothing to fear, and much to look forward to in the foreseeable future … the best campaigns … are those in which all of the available tools have been used to their best effect …Those who embrace and exploit all the tools, including artificial and human intelligence, will continue to win awards and deliver value to the companies they serve. (Hood, 2019, para. 6)

Findings 2: What industry leaders and critics say about practices

An initial thematic categorisation of interviewees' expressed interests and concerns shows use of a range of terms including misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and alternative facts, often interchangeably, and a strong focus on communication technologies such as social media, bots, data analytics, algorithms, and artificial intelligence contributing to disinformation (see Table 1). The collapse of media business models is also a key concern, along with a rise in partisan journalism and the blurring of opinion and commentary with news. PR, 'spin', paid influencers, deceptive advertising, and some forms of targeted marketing and micro targeting are concerns, but are mostly seen as less problematic than the activities of social media platforms, new technologies, and weakened and partisan journalism.

Table 1. The top 20 issues of concern nominated by interviewees.

No	Theme	Terms included in coding for this theme
1	Post-truth	
2	Trust	Declining trust, loss of trust, distrust
3	Disinformation	
4	Misinformation	
5	Fake news	
6	Alternative facts	
7	Social media platforms	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
8	Media business model	Advertising revenue
9	Partisan journalism	Bias, commentary, opinion in news
10	Clickbait	Sensational headlines
11	Bots	Fake accounts
12	Data analytics	Big data, data mining
13	Algorithms	'Black box' code, algorithmic bias
14	Artificial intelligence	AI
15	Privacy	
16	PR	Public relations
17	Spin	Propaganda

18	Influencers	Paid
19	Deceptive advertising	'Native' advertising
20	Targeted marketing	Micro-targeting

Almost all media and communication professionals and researchers interviewed described disinformation and related concepts as 'pervasive', rather than frequent, occasional, rare, or non-existent, and as a 'very serious' issue (RQ 1). Furthermore, most feel that the problem is getting worse, because of social media platforms and new communication technologies (RQ 1).

Some of the significant comments of industry leaders in relation to public relations, advertising and marketing, and the use of new communications technologies are reported in the following.

Public relations

The leading initiative globally to self-regulate public relations is the UK CIPR's Royal Charter, which enables practitioners to become chartered in the same way as accountants and thus accountable and subject to censure. The CIPR is often held up as a model, as in other countries industry codes and standards are voluntary with no legal basis for enforcement. However, CIPR Fellow, Stuart Bruce pointed that of the CIPR's 10,000 members, only around 300 (3%) have completed the professional development training and attended the one-day accreditation program required to become a chartered practitioner (S. Bruce, personal communication, September 6, 2019). In short, the much-touted self-regulation scheme is largely smoke and mirrors.

On the other side of the Atlantic, a panel discussion hosted by the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in New York City in August 2019 publicly acknowledged that PR has played a role in creating disinformation and contributed to the phenomenon of post-truth and what a RAND Corporation study called 'truth decay' (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). In discussing findings of the RAND study with co-author Jennifer Kavanagh, IPR CEO Tina McCorkindale said: 'I do think PR bears some responsibility for truth decay' (Field, 2018, para. 5).

Long-serving US PR consultant Alan Kelly believes that the PR industry needs to 'come clean' about the nature of its role and work, which he sees as predominantly advocacy to influence and manipulate, particularly on behalf of business and government (2017, para. 8). Kelly frankly states that the PR industry obfuscates what it does on a daily basis because it wants to 'maintain a beautified view of its work' (2017, para. 9). In an interview in Washington, D.C. in mid-2019, Kelly said that 'there are poisonous elements in the mix' and expressed concern that these are being covered up under theories and codes of practice that profess mutuality and social good (A. Kelly, personal communication, May 27, 2019).

Lucas Bernays Held, the grandson of Edward Bernays—the widely acclaimed 'father of public relations' (Guth & Marsh, 2007, p. 70) —says a stumbling block in PR is that 'there are competing conceptions of PR'. He acknowledges that from one perspective PR is advocacy, often working for business or powerful government elites to influence stakeholders and/or society. However, from another perspective PR professes to facilitate social adjustment of an organisation to align with the expectations of its stakeholders informed by two-way engagement and relationships (L. Bernays Held, personal communication, August 28, 2019). Like Therese Manus, CEO of the Norwegian Communication Association, Bernays Held says PR has something of an identity crisis—even a 'split personality' (L. Bernays Held, personal communication, August 28, 2019).

Advertising and marketing communication

Far from being a concern, the blurring of the traditional 'church and state' separation between news and paid promotional content in media and between *paid* (advertising), *earned* (editorial), *shared* (social) and *owned* media content (e.g., organisation websites)—referred to as the 'PESO' model of media content— is welcomed by some leading practitioners. The global CEO of the New York headquartered PR group Red Havas, James Wright, proudly coined and promoted the term 'merged media' in a 2019 article. Wright welcomed the findings of a survey that found '60% of public relations leaders, CEOs, and students surveyed in 2019 say that within five years the average person will not be able to make a distinction between paid, earned, shared, and owned media when consuming information' (Wright, 2019, para. 1). Wright repeated his enthusiasm for a lack of distinction between news and paid promotion in discussions.

Natalia Nikolova, who heads the Advanced MBA program at the University of Technology Sydney, believes that marketing practitioners are not looking seriously enough at ethics. She said: 'I have not heard of one major marketing or advertising agency that is making decisions about clients and campaigns based on ethics or issues such as data responsibility' (N. Nikolova, personal communication, November 5, 2019). She points to the campaigns of Big Tobacco, the sugar industry, climate change denial, and the promotion of gambling as examples of marketers, advertising agencies, PR firms, and media companies taking the money irrespective of the negative human health, environmental, or social outcomes.

The use of paid 'influencers', one of the latest trends in advertising and marketing, is a concern because, unlike traditional advertising that is transparent, many paid influencers do not reveal their commercial interests and consumers can be misled. Also, many so-called influencers' are fake, with no relevant qualifications or experience. Richard Bagnall, Chairman of the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) and CEO (Europe) of a global media analysis firm, said 'the whole issue of influencers is problematic. In many cases, so-called influencers are being exposed as a massive fraud'. Bagnall gave the following example.

> I know of cases in which someone has generated over 50,000 followers, partly from bots, and then been able to quit work and make a living as an influencer, getting paid to promote products, receiving foreign trips, and even writing blogs and columns for mainstream media, despite having no real expertise or real world influence at all. (R. Bagnall, personal communication, October 1, 2019)

Com-Tech—New tools; few rules

Many working in or studying public communication are concerned that new communications technologies are leading to an escalation in disinformation, deception, and manipulation. In relation to RQ 2, senior executive in the WPP group and Kantar Media, Sean Larkins, said 'the online world has become a wild west' (S. Larkins, personal communication, May 29, 2019). A former president of the American Academy of Advertising warns that 'data merger' through mergers and acquisitions of media, technology, and telecommunications companies poses a major threat by bringing together 'big data' sets that can be exploited and even breach privacy (Anon, personal communication, September 30, 2019).

Bob Jensen, who worked as a communication executive in the White House and with a number of US government agencies for more than 30 years, said 'it is definitely worse because of scale'. He reflected: 'There has always been fake news and even disinformation. But today with the internet, and particularly social media, millions and millions of people can post information and billions can access it' (R. Jensen, personal communication, May 28, 2019). Veteran journalist and former national newspaper editor in chief, Peter Fray, agrees. Fray notes that 'misinformation and disinformation have always been present in human societies', but he

sees 'scale as a significant difference, particularly as a result of social media' (P. Fray, personal communication, September 12, 2019).

Nevertheless, a number of the industry leaders interviewed focussed on the potential of new ICTs to benefit their employers and clients, without expressing any concerns about exploitation, algorithmic bias, and other issues raised by researchers.

Findings 3: What industry leaders and critics say about solutions

When media and communication practitioners nominated or were probed about solutions, most apportioned responsibility for improvements in ethics and standards to communications technology companies such as social media platforms, fact checking initiatives, and regulators. In relation to RQ 4, this suggests that addressing disinformation, deception, and manipulation is someone else's responsibility other than the producers or consumers of information and media content. For example, Lucas Bernays Held argues that:

> Even if 100% of all PR professionals were to conduct themselves in strict accordance with the highest standards of truth, the problem of disinformation and misinformation would remain. This is not to say that it is not essential that they act with probity; rather, that this alone won't solve the problem. (L. Bernays Held, personal communication, August 28, 2019).

Despite an undertone of defensiveness, Bernays Held is correct in the collective view of media and communication practitioners and researchers interviewed and cited in literature. Most agree that there is a need for a range of solutions. Table 2 lists the eight most mentioned solutions in order of interviewees' stated priority. Perhaps unsurprisingly given recent media publicity and scandals, self-regulation by and/or regulation of social media platforms were among the most common strategies proposed, along with fact checking agencies. Significantly, self-regulation by practitioners in advertising, PR, marketing, and journalism was not ranked highly. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. The main solutions proposed by interviewees.

No	Theme	Description / Notes
1	Social media self-regulation	Particularly Facebook and Google
2	Fact checking	Particularly by independent agencies
3	Social media regulation	As above
4	Media business model/s	Pay for quality content
5	Media literacy	Critical consumption and production
6	Practitioner self-regulation	Advertising, marketing, PR, political campaigners, journalism
7	Public media	Such as national public broadcasters
8	Legislation	Anti-trust action against social platforms

Interviews revealed diversity of views, and continuing passing of blame and responsibility to others. However, in reflecting on the literature and data collected, it becomes clear that there is a range of strategies available. It is not possible to discuss the specifics of all of the proposals and recommendations produced in this study. But the research indicates that strategies to re-establish open ethical public communication need to be taken top-down (i.e., by governments and regulatory bodies); bottom-up (by consumers of information), and in the middle by media companies, social media platforms, and by media and communication

practitioners working in journalism, advertising, marketing, PR, and corporate, government, and political communication. Some of the most expressed views and arguments presented from these three perspectives are summarised in the remainder of this discussion.

Top down: Legislation, regulation, public media
Media and communication practitioners and researchers are mostly opposed to legislation—strongly in many cases—for reasons of freedom of media and because it puts increasing control of media and the internet in the hands of governments. However, many have become impatient with social media and believe that their activities need to be covered by stricter regulation or legislation. In referring to the online world as a 'wild west', senior WPP executive Sean Larkins said:

> The online world has … little or no legislation in place to police it. Social media need to be brought into the same regulatory framework as broadcasters. We'd do well to bring newspapers in line with this too. (S. Larkins, personal communication, May 29, 2019)

Immediate past chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, Anne Gregory, says there is a need for government legislation with severe penalties for privacy breaches and disinformation, although she favours self-regulation by media platforms, as well as communication professionals as discussed in the following section (A. Gregory, personal communication August 14, 2019).

While there are mixed views on support for public broadcasting, most see the role of media such as the BBC, CBC in Canada, ABC in Australia, and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the USA as important in an environment of collapsing commercial media business models, 'tabloid journalism' fuelled by populism, and partisan journalism (e.g., Fox News).

Bottom up: Media literacy and self-responsibility
While attributing significant responsibility to government and regulators to act top-down, many senior media and communication practitioners and academics also see a need for increased self-responsibility by citizens. As well as critical reading of content, new strategies proposed include searching for corroborating sources and fact checking on sites such as FactCheck (https://www.factcheck.org); Politifact (https://www.politifact.com); and Snopes (https://www.snopes.com)—a site that has led to the term *snoping*. Citizens can also contact organisations such as First Draft (https://firstdraftnews.org/about), a global collaboration of journalists and researchers who investigate issues that are suspected of involving misinformation or disinformation and publish corrective information.

Deployment of such strategies falls within the construct of media literacy, which has been widely advocated for many decades. However, in addition to *media literacy for consumption* designed to create critical interpreters of media content—referred to as *inoculation* and 'the protectionist debate' (Mihailidis, 2014, p. 36)—a number of media researchers call for development of skills in schools and adult education so that people in all walks of life can be 'creators and communicators'. Referred to as the *media literacy for production* (Mihailidis 2014, p. 43), this expansion of media literacy through what has been broadly called the *prosumer* movement (Kotler, 2010) could create 'armies' of fact checkers 'outing' and refuting disinformation and naming and shaming perpetrators of deception and manipulation, in the view of many communication practitioners.

Veteran journalist Peter Fray says media literacy is a key strategy to combat the effects of disinformation and prevent a further slide towards a post-truth society. He says we need people —not just young people, but older people as well—to 'become active media consumers, not passive consumers of information' (P. Fray, personal communication, September 12,

2019). First Draft's Australian bureau editor Anne Kruger, strongly supports 'cross-generational media literacy education' for information consumption as well as production. Fray and Kruger also note that recent research has challenged earlier warnings of a *backfire effect* caused by corrections and refutation, and found that they can be effective (Ecker, O'Reilly, Reid, & Chang, 2019).

Along with Fray, Kruger also says that a key part of 'bottom up' approaches is that consumers must be convinced to 'support quality journalism' (A. Kruger, personal communication, September 20, 2019). Fray said:

> One of the big moments in the news business—a tipping point—was when publishers and broadcasters adopted an internet strategy that made content free online. Once people got used to free online news, it became hard to go back. We're now trying to claw back the audience and convince them to pay, but that is a big challenge. (P. Fray, personal communication, September 12, 2019)

Fray added: 'We wouldn't dream that we could get a daily cup of coffee for free. Why do we think that a news report or investigative analysis should be free?'

Citizen participation in activist groups and social movements is also an avenue for bottom-up change. Examples include climate change action groups challenging petro-chemical industry and conservative government propaganda. Recent uprisings of the Black Lives Matter movement illustrates that activist groups can challenge dominant discourses and representations.

Malcolms in the middle: Reforming public communication practices

As shown in Table 2, greater self-regulation by social media platforms is called for by many practitioners and researchers working in media and public communication. For example, former senior communication executive in the White House and several US government departments and agencies, Bob Jensen, said 'the big social media platforms are working to self-regulate', but he believes that they 'have to learn how to self-regulate better' (R. Jensen, personal communication, May 28, 2019).

Greater self-regulation by communication professionals working in the middle of the public communication ecosystem is not as keenly identified. But extensive literature shows that this must be part of a strategy to reduce disinformation, deception, and manipulation.

The examples of practices in advertising, marketing, and PR cited show that there is much wrong in the middle, and that it is not only the fringes of public communication practice that are involved in disinformation, deception, and manipulation, as often claimed.

Anne Gregory, who is a professor of corporate communication and PR as well as immediate past chair of the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management, says that many practitioners are 'too willing to either accept the money from clients, or not question deeply enough to ascertain the veracity of what they are being told'. She added: 'The communication profession has to clean up its act and become more ethically aware' (A. Gregory, personal communication, August 14, 2019).

The precise scope of such reforms is beyond this transdisciplinary examination of the sources of disinformation, deception, and manipulation. However, participants in this study pointed to strengthened codes of ethics in the previously discussed fields of practice; practitioner training in ethics; corporate social responsibility (CSR) by client organisations; and meaningful commitment to *social purpose* in corporations, as discussed by Sidibe (2020).

Conclusions and implications

Taken point at a time, there are few if any surprises afforded by this research. It confirms much existing research in relation to the role of public media; regulation of social media; ethics in advertising, marketing, and PR; and so on. However, it synthesises insights from existing reports and a range of contemporary expert views to identify the necessity for a 'we're all in together' approach, rather than finger pointing and blaming a 'few bad apples'. Second, it fosters a sense of urgency by pointing to the unnerving frequency and pervasiveness of unethical practices and looming technologies that can accelerate these in the absence of mitigating actions. Furthermore, it draws attention to the role of widely used professional practices and their central role in disinformation, deception, and manipulation. It looks beyond the common calls for regulating social media and the defensive narratives of communication industries to identify the need for a coordinated, multi-level approach.

Given the track record of social media platforms and data analytics companies, it becomes clear that reform of algorithm management, moderation, and data protection policies is necessary and even urgent. In the view of most participants in this study, self-regulation is preferred, but given reluctance and even petulance by social media oligopolies such as Facebook, enforced regulation is viewed as a potentially necessary 'big stick'. Continuing support for public media is considered another necessary top-down strategy by government.

Because of resistance to legislation, regulation, and even self-regulation by online platforms, a pragmatic conclusion is that a safe, trustworthy online environment is unlikely to emerge quickly, if at all. Therefore, increasing and updating media literacy among citizens is an important bottom-up strategy. As well as providing *inoculation* through media literacy related to critical consumption, mobilising citizens through media literacy for production to act as fact checkers and even editors correcting disinformation will increase the efficacy of this strategy. Also, convincing people to pay for quality news reporting and analysis looms as a challenge, but is seen as a key step.

However, the scandals discussed here and numerous others reported in media articles and books, and the admissions of industry and professional leaders such as Gregory, Fray, CIPR president Sarah Hall, and IPR CEO Tina McCorkindale, show that the alleged 'professions' of advertising, PR, marketing, corporate and government communication, and sometimes journalism, are key contributors to disinformation, deception, and manipulation. If media are the weapons firing disinformation, these practitioners in the middle ground of the contemporary information ecosystem are providing and loading the ammunition as much or more than trolls and hostile states. In many cases, they are the ones who create the bots, 'black box' algorithms, clickbait, and fake accounts.

A concerning finding of this study however is that, while public communication practitioners in these fields acknowledge problems among their ranks, most see others as mainly responsible for change. Thus, there needs to be a shift among public communication professionals to accept a level of ownership and responsibility before major reform can occur. This throws a major challenge and opportunity at the feet of professional industry bodies, as well as educators and researchers.

Limitations

This study was undertaken in major Western countries using qualitative methodology, therefore the findings are not generalisable. However, its access to senior leaders in relevant professional bodies provides some noteworthy insights.

Funding details and disclosure

References

American Association for the Advancement of Science. (2019, April 29). Study scrutinises credibility of weight management blogs by most popular influencers on social media. *EurekAlert*. https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2019-04/eaft-ssc042919.php

Amos, A., & Haglund, M. (2000). From social taboo to 'torch of freedom: The marketing of cigarettes to women. *Tobacco Control, 9*(1), 3–8. https://doi.org/10.1136/tc.9.1.3

Andrews, L. (2006). Spin: From tactic to tabloid, *Journal of Public Affairs, 6*(1), 31–45. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.37

Bimber, B., & de Zuñiga, H. (2020). The unedited public sphere. *New Media and Society, 22*(4), 700–715. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819893980

Bourne, C. (2019). AI cheerleaders: Public relations, neoliberalism and artificial intelligence. *Public Relations Inquiry, 8*(2), 109–125. https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X19835250

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Carey, J. (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and culture*. Unwin Hyman.

Cathcart, R. (1981). *Post-communication: Rhetorical analysis and evaluation*. Bobbs-Merrill. (Original work published 1966)

Caulfield, T., Marcon, A., Murdoch, B., Brown, J., Perrault, S., Jarry, J., Synder, J, Anthony, S., Brooks, S., Master, Z., Rachul, C., Ogbogu, U., Greenberg, J., Zarzeczny, A., & Hyde-Lay, R. (2019). Health misinformation and the power of narrative messaging in the public sphere. *Canadian Journal of Bioethics, 2*(2), 1–144. https://doi.org/10.7202/1060911ar

Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, society, world: Social theory and digital media practice*. Polity

Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.

Craig, R. (2018). For a practical discipline. *Journal of Communication, 68*(2), 289–297. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx013

Davis, A. (2019). *Political communication: A new introduction for crisis times*. Polity.

Davies, N. (2009). *Flat earth news*. Random House.

de Pelsmacker, P., & Neijens, P. (2012). New advertising formats: How persuasion knowledge affects consumer response. *Journal of Marketing Communications, 18*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2011.620762

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2008). *Strategic of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Derakhshan, H., & Wardle, C. (2017). Information disorder: Definitions. Paper presented at *Understanding and addressing the disinformation ecosystem* conference. Annenberg School for Communication, Annenberg, PA. https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Disinformation-Ecosystem-20180207-v2.pdf

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. Macmillan

Ecker, U., O'Reilly, Z., Reid, J., & Chang, E. (2019). The effectiveness of short-format refutational fact-checks. Online pre-print. *British Journal of Psychology*. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjop.12383

Edelman. (2013). Sponsored content: A broader relationship with the US news media. New York, NY. https://www.slideshare.net/EdelmanInsights/sc-report-vol1

Edelman. (2020). *2020 Edelman trust barometer*. https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer

Edwards, L. (2018, March 26). Cambridge Analytica: A symptom of a deeper malaise in the persuasion industry. London School of Economics and Political Science, *Polis*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2018/03/26/cambridge-analytica-a-symptom-of-a-deeper-malaise-in-the-persuasion-industry

Esser, F. (2008). 'Spin doctor'. In W. Donsbach, (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of communication* (pp. 4783–4787). Blackwell.

Fawkes, J. (2015). *Public relations ethics and professionalism: The shadow of excellence*. Routledge.

Field, A. (2018, August 7). PR and the problem of truth decay: It's a matter of trust. Institute for Public Relations. https://instituteforpr.org/pr-and-the-problem-of-truth-decay-its-a-matter-of-trust

Fishkin, J., Luskin, R., & Jowell, R. (2000). Deliberative polling and public consultation. *Parliamentary Affairs, 53*(4), 657–666. https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/53.4.657

Foss, S., & Griffin, C. (1995). Beyond persuasion: A proposal for an invitational rhetoric. *Communication Monographs, 62*, 2–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759509376345

Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 109–142). MIT Press.

Friestad, M., & Wright, P. (1994). The persuasion knowledge model: How people cope with persuasion attempts. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *21*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/209380

Goldenberg, S. (2013, February 14). Secret funding helped build vast network of climate change denial thinktanks. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/feb/14/funding-climate-change-denial-thinktanks-network

Government Communication Service. (2019). *RESIST: Counter disinformation toolkit*. London, UK, p. 6. https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/resist-counter-disinformation-toolkit

Garnham, N. (1992). The media and the public sphere. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 359–376). MIT Press.

Guth, D., & Marsh, C. (2007). *Public relations: A values-driven approach* (3rd ed.). Pearson.

Habermas, J. (2006). Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication Theory*, *16*(4), 411–426. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x

Hall, S. (2018, July 6). Presentation to Bledcom, Slovenia. http://www.sarahhallconsulting.co.uk/blog/2018/7/6/a-world-in-crisis-the-role-of-public-relations

Heath, R. (2006). A rhetorical theory approach to issues. In C. Botan & V. Hazelton (Eds.), *Public relations theory II* (pp. 63–99). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hood, I. (2019). Nothing to fear from AI. Public Relations Consultants Association. https://www.prca.org.uk/prca-50-nothing-to-fear-from-ai

Kavanagh, J., & Rich, M. (2018). *Truth decay: An initial exploration of the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay.html

Kelly, A. (2017), June 9). Alan Kelly on PR's hidden truth: It's competitive and nobody wants to admit it. *The Measurement Standard*. http://www.themeasurementstandard.com/2017/06/alan-kelly-on-prs-hidden-truth-its-competitive-offensive-and-nobody-wants-to-admits-it

Kitterman, T. (2019, July 25). Epstein puff pieces put focus on PR and pay-to-play publishing. *Ragan's PR Daily*. https://www.prdaily.com/epstein-puff-pieces-put-focus-on-pr-and-pay-to-play-publishing

Kotler, P. (2010). The prosumer movement: A new challenge for marketers. In B. Blättel-Mink & K. Hellmann (Eds), *Prosumer revisited* (pp. 51–60). Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Mazarr, M., Casey, A., Demus, A., Harold, S., Matthews, L., Beauchamp-Mustafaga, N., & Sladden, J. (2019). *Hostile social manipulation: Present realities and emerging trends*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2713.html

McGuire, W. (1969). The nature of attitudes and attitude change. In G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology*, Vol. 3 (2nd ed., pp. 136–314). Addison-Wesley.

McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press.

Mihailidis, P. (2014). *Media literacy and the emerging citizen*. Peter Lang.

Minty, E. (2019, August 15). A threat to public relations—and an opportunity. *Power & Influence*. http://ellaminty.com/commentaries/ethics-in-pr

Ofcom. (2018, August 2). Communications market report. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/117256/CMR-2018-narrative-report.pdf

Olasky, M. (1989). The aborted debate within public relations: An approach through Kuhn's paradigm. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 1* (1–4), 87–95. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjprr0101-4_4

Oreskes, N., & Conway, E. (2010). Merchants of doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to climate change. Bloomsbury.

Papacharissi, Z. (2002). The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere. *New Media and Society*, *4*(1), 9–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614440222226244

Public Relations Consultants Association). (2017). PR Census 2016. http://news.prca.org.uk/publications

Rushdoony, R. (2016, June 10). Doctrine of selective depravity: Parts *1–111*. *Chalcedon*. https://chalcedon.edu/magazine/doctrine-of-selective-depravity-parts-i-iii

Sabbagh C. (2019). Assessing credibility of online nutritional information: Analysis of key UK social media influencers' weight management blogs. Paper presented at European Congress on Obesity, Glasgow.

Schudson, M., & Zelizer, B. (2017). Fake news in context. Paper presented at *Understanding and addressing the disinformation ecosystem* conference. Annenberg School for Communication, Annenberg. https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Disinformation-Ecosystem-20180207-v2.pdf

Segal, D. (2018, February 4). How Bell Pottinger, PR firm for despots and rogues, met its end in South Africa. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/business/bell-pottinger-guptas-zuma-south-africa.html

Shannon, C., & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. University of Illinois.

Shenton, A. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, *22*(2), 63–75. https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201

Sidibe, M. (2020). *Brands on a mission: How to achieve social impact and business growth through purpose*. Routledge.

Silberg, J., & Manyika, J. (2019, June). Notes from the AI frontier: Tackling bias in AI (and in humans). McKinsey Global Institute. https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/artificial-intelligence/tackling-bias-in-artificial-intelligence-and-in-humans

Statista. (2019). Global advertising spending from 2014 to 2021. https://www.statista.com/statistics/273288/advertising-spending-worldwide

Tjepkema, L. (2019). What is artificial intelligence marketing and why is it so powerful? *Emarsys*. https://www.emarsys.com/resources/blog/artificial-intelligence-marketing-solutions

University of Southern California, Annenberg. (2018). *2018 global communications report*. https://annenberg.usc.edu/research/center-public-relations/global-communications-report

Tye, L. (1998). *The father of spin: Edward L. Bernays and the birth of public relations*. Crown.

Wolffe, R. (2019, June 14). Good riddance, Sarah Sanders: Washington's worst communicator. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/14/sarah-sanders-trump-press-secretary-good-riddance

Wright, J. (2019, July 22). What is merged media? It's the future of PR. *LinkedIn*. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-merged-media-its-future-pr-james-wright

---

[1]   Epstein was found dead in his cell at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York City on 10 August, 2019.