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Is the communication revolution good for democracy?

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Abstract

This commentary examines the effects of social media on democracy, focusing on the democratization of information, the "three powers of the dark side" and the question of whether PR professionals can be agents of ethical influence. The three powers of the dark side flow from the: potential use of digital communication to subvert democracy; citizen's continuous partial attention driven by the 'second-screen' phenomenon; and decline of trust in journalism that can deprive citizens of credible information curation. The commentary concludes with the affirmation that the communication revolution can be good for democracy – but only if professional communicators are ready to lead it.

Russian president Vladimir Putin and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani, recently used public relations in surprising ways, using the tools of other nations' democracy to gain influence through communication.

Writing in *The New York Times* in September, Mr. Putin made a case against U.S. military intervention in Syria directly to the American people. He invoked shared values between the two countries, positioning himself on the side of international law, human rights and democracy, stressing his preference for "peaceful dialogue" over the "language of force" (Putin, 2013).

Days later, Iran's new president made a similarly unlikely foray into public diplomacy. Breaking with his incendiary predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mr. Rouhani used interviews with Western media and a speech to the United Nations to renounce his nation's nuclear ambitions and promise a new dialogue with "full transparency" (Borger & Pilkington, 2013).

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Both gambits raised eyebrows. Mr. Putin's argument, while seemingly logical, was shocking given his fluency in the language of force as a means to crush dissent, censor dialogue and subvert both democracy and the rule of law. In Mr. Rouhani's case, it is too early to judge his sincerity or ability to follow through on his lofty words; his supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, was less enthusiastic ("Iran's Khamenei," 2013).

It is true that Putin and Rouhani were elected by their people. However, while nominal democracy is increasingly common around the world, the quality of democracy remains uneven at best. In *The Journal of Democracy*, Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino propose eight markers of 'high-quality' democracy: rule of law, participation, competition, vertical accountability, horizontal accountability, freedom, equality and responsiveness (Diamond & Morlino, 2004).

Are these democratic ideals closer in an age where global communication power is within every citizen's reach? Or do the strategies and tools of modern communication help autocrats as much as democrats?

The democratization of information

The social media revolution is often portrayed as a boon to democracy, and in many ways it is; even as economic power has become more concentrated, communication power has become more diffused. The interconnection of most of humanity, coupled with the promise of global publishing power in every pocket, has resulted in a substantial democratization of information and influence.

Whether we act as citizens, consumers, investors, activists or employees, we now have the power to shape corporate reputations; we can build up governments or bring them down; we can start social movements in a moment and spread truth or lies, hope or fear, peace or violence, clarity or ambiguity. The use of social media in the Arab Spring remains a prominent example, and pro-democracy activists in troubled places continue to use these networks to communicate and mobilize their supporters.

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The three powers of the dark side

There is, however, a darker side to the communication revolution – one that has three dimensions.

First, while it is easy to idealize social networks as instruments of democracy, like all communications channels they are value-neutral. Digital communication can be used to subvert democracy, whether it's a despotic regime using social media for surveillance or even, more subtly, a Canadian politician's aide hiding behind a carefully crafted email to avoid questions from journalists.

Second, the daily avalanche of information and the 'second-screen' phenomenon (e.g., browsing the web while watching television) is creating a culture of what writer Linda Stone calls "continuous partial attention" (Stone, n.d.). If the informed voter is the sword of democracy, we are defenseless when we cannot – or will not – pay attention.

Third, the widely documented decline of trust in journalism risks depriving us of our best sources of credible curation.

In the spring of 2013, two respected Canadian journalists reported viewing a video in which the Mayor of Toronto appeared to be smoking crack cocaine in the company of drug dealers, while making racist and homophobic comments. Six of the mayor's staff resigned abruptly and one of the alleged drug dealers was murdered. Despite the alleged criminal activity, the mayor evaded questions for months – so successfully that he shifted the debate to whether the media is being unfair to him – the subject of a recent panel discussion hosted, presumably without irony, by the Canadian Public Relations Society.

The lesson: even in a society where the structures of democracy are strong, the culture of democracy can be weak.

PR professionals: Agents of ethical influence?

In all sectors today – business, government or NGOs – we see a new type of arms race. It is a mixture of hard information and soft power: gathering data to enable influence; owning media channels in addition to earning or paying for them; using public diplomacy to reinforce private negotiation; and, in an age where communication is so difficult to control, using communication to gain influence.

While communication channels and tools are value-neutral, communication professionals are not.

Perhaps the greatest task of the modern communication professional is to bring ethics to bear on the use of communication power.

We must advance the idea that the legitimacy of a government does not come only from an election and the legitimacy of a corporation does not come only from its shareholders. Both come from ongoing accountability to their stakeholders and from public consensus about their moral right to govern or license to operate.

Traditionally, this accountability flows through channels such as Parliaments, shareholder meetings, and professional journalism. However, in an age when these channels are weaker, communication professionals must help organizations achieve a new kind of legitimacy – one earned through ongoing, ethical communication.

There are many people communicating in this world but only a small fraction have formal education in public relations, have membership or accreditation from a professional society, or subscribe to a code of ethics and standards of practice.

Members of this tiny minority have great skill; and if they use that skill wisely to gain influence over the way organizations communicate, they can have both great credibility and great opportunity.

The communication revolution can be good for democracy – but only if professional communicators are ready to lead it.

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