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Public relations in the interactive era

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Article Info	**Abstract**
	This editorial for the issue 1, volume 4 of the Journal of Professional Communication discusses how social media has ushered in a new era of interactivity which has created an entirely new arena for the practice of public relations and communications management. It traces the development of practice through the modernist era, which privileged structure, science and rationality to the postmodern era which the author argues was essentially a reaction to the rigidity of modernism. It is argued that postmodernism as an era is also complete, replaced by a new way of organizing thoughts and relationships brought on by the powerful and relatively easy interactivity offered by the internet and digital devices. The author concludes by arguing that Bernays' conception of public relations was steeped in the ideas of the modernist era and that, ironically, it is McLuhan's conception of the distinction between the artist and the scientist and the practice of pattern finding that will rule.

I t is strange to think that one is living in a moment of historic change – the kind of change that will be given a major, bolded entry in histories of our times. It is exciting to think that one works in a profession which has an active role in shaping that new reality and making it understandable for organizations and individuals. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are living in just such a moment now, as we watch digital communications and the internet completely transform the way we organize our social lives, both personally and professionally. Of course the profession I alluded to above is public relations and communications management.

The internet has transformed not only how we interact and deal with others, it has transformed the way in which we perceive and construct ourselves.

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For the professional communications industry, this poses a great challenge and a massive opportunity. The greatest challenge that we face is the fact that communication and public relations matter a lot more than they did before. The reason for this is straightforward: the structure of the arena in which we operate has changed.

It could be argued that we lived in the era of high modernism from the end of World War II until the invention of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners Lee in 1994. Modernism is roughly defined by a structural and rationalist approach to the construction of our cognitive map of the world. It affirmed the power of humans to improve and shape their environment through the scientific method and technology. Many mainstream modernist thinkers viewed modernism as a progressive movement that enabled us to renovate old institutions that no longer seemed to function or fit well within the bounds of contemporary existence. As a direct consequence of this viewpoint, they rejected many ancient stand-bys such as religion and traditional concepts of social organization such as marriage and the family. In the name of modernism, artistsm architects, designers and other creative professionals called for the reexamination of all aspects of life. Some examples of modernist architects are Le Corbusier, Gropius and Mies van der Rohe, many of whom were high modernists, seeking an idealized perfection, harmony of form and function and dismissal of ornamentation. The aim was purity and simplicity of form. We could see this mirrored in public relations and communications management strategy at the time, with the pursuit of an idealized and formally pure two-way symmetrical communication construct (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

When the internet—more specifically the world wide web—began to shape the popular imagination, it shattered the certainties on which the system of communications management had been based. As the web replaced traditional gate-keeping structure in the organization of media channels, it also reshaped the individual's relationship to the flow of news and information. Whereas the old, modernist mass communications structure empowered experts to create information and then manage its flow—editors and official spokespeople shaping the message—the new, emerging interactive structure is characterized by dialogue and fluidity: user generated content.

This new fluidity creates many challenges, from a shifting moral and ethical ground to a renewed need for constant stewardship of ideas and brands — brands which compete in markets which have become conversations (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2009, p.147). There are two sides to the interpersonal communication story and both sides have to do with the body or the person, depending on how you want to define 'body' and 'person.' Why?

Simply because interpersonal communication exists between people who are connected to one another through many filaments: biological, social, cultural and political, to name a few. Each of those filaments is represented externally, in terms of how we send signals out to the beings involved in our social lives; but they are also represented internally, in our minds and bodies.

The old modernist conception of communication was a lot simpler. We could reduce the person to a node on a graph or a flowchart—a receiver of information who could be targeted and relied upon to behave within the constraints set upon them by social norms and rules. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1994), a postmodernist philosopher, expressed it insightfully when he said, writing in the eighties and nineties, predominantly, that mass media had created a hyper-reality dominated by an institutionalized popular culture so pervasive that people have trouble determining what is real and what is a simulation. Postmodernism is often defined as a reaction against the formalism and hierarchy of modernism. It is interesting to note that he died in 2007, just as social media was beginning to take off. For Baudrillard's thinking still had some of the assumptions of the modernist era underpinning it: centralized control by large entertainment conglomerates and expert cultural producers. Since then, however, the interactive and social internet has broken the stranglehold that experts and powerful brands had on the public imagination through their control of the channels of mass media. One could argue that the interactive era in which we find ourselves now is a clean break from both the formalism and hierarchy of modernism and the anarchic 60s-inspired eclecticism of postmodernism. Indeed, the context for both of those movements was left behind when the individual consumer was transformed, through the development of the interactive and libertarian internet, into a *prosumer* - a person who is simultaneously producer and consumer.

The new interactive media—social media is just the start—empower the person, making individual needs, desires, dreams and fears the centre of attention, itself viewed as a dynamic, interactive nexus of constant activity. *Time* magazine was prescient when they named "You" to be their Person of the Year (2006). They recognized that the person—however the concept of the "person" is defined—was now both the target and the creator of media.

In the interactive era, the person receives information from brands, but then transforms that information through the alchemy of their perception into signals that are shared through their network. Those packets have meanings—receptors and attractors, if you will pardon the biological metaphor—which trigger sets of thoughts in the minds of those who perceive them. Then these packets are assimilated into the mindscapes of the receivers and transformed

again when those receivers form their messages (tweets, status updates, blogs or what have you) and transmit them. Successful messages are spread widely across a network, changing the mindscapes of many individuals internally, shaping their beliefs and desires, and simultaneously forming trends and fashions which serve as metanarratives that create the social forms into which individuals dock their minds and bodies to refuel, reboot and recalibrate their outlooks and understandings of themselves and their social lives.

Modernism allowed for a reductive vision of the person and society. It permitted mechanistic metaphors like conduits and channels. We saw this mirrored in the way that communications products were configured: television, radio and print were delivered via branded and sealed channels that you could subscribe to. They used linear time as an organizing factor. They monetized massification and similarity. Compared to this, our new interactive condition in public relations is, by its very foundations, profoundly interpersonal. The metaphor for organizing ideas and society is becoming organic and embodied (Lakoff, 1999). An example of this is the fascination with the mind-body connection. Cognition, the inner eye, and the practice of yoga, meditation and mindfulness fascinate us. We say that this is because of a cacophonous society, but I think it is because we are trying to reprogram ourselves in the bewildering new world that social media and digital living has thrust upon us. We can briefly illustrate this change in narrative by contrasting two well-known statements from the field.

Edward L. Bernays, in his seminal work, *Propaganda*, identified public relations as being informed by the social sciences - he said that psychology and sociology should inform the practice, which should form the tastes of the masses:

> The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. . . . We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. . . . In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons. . . who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind (Bernays, 2005, p. 37).

His vision of public relations is built upon the structures and power of the past. It implies the ability to control the channel and manipulate the message to determine the thoughts of the individual. There is little room for the agency of the prosumer in Bernays' vision of things. The fact that he refers to the concept of the "public mind" as a collective entity that exemplifies the structured, channelled, top-down vision of society prevalent in modernism. What is also interesting is that Bernays believes that this controlling of the public mind is a progressive, almost utopianist project. It is this vision that was shattered by the fragmented reality of the interactive era.

Consider McLuhan's thoughts in contrast to those of Bernays. Despite writing at the beginning of the digital revolution, he was prescient in understanding the process of *making sense of things through feeling them* that the artist goes through when creating:

> Hypnotized by their rear-view mirrors, philosophers and scientists alike tried to focus the *figure* of man in the old *ground* of nineteenth-century industrial mechanism and congestion. They failed to bridge from the old *figure* to the new. It is man who has become both *figure* and ground via the electrotechnical extension of his awareness. *With the extension of his nervous system as a total information environment, man bridges art and nature* (McLuhan, 1972, p. 11).

Indeed, the idea of the extension of the nervous system is a great metaphor for the new arena of practice in public relations. Nerve cells extend toward one another and are linked through electrochemical messages. They grow through stimulation and reinforcement — a fact that is captured quite well in the neuroscience adage: "Neurons that fire together wire together." Our nervous systems are embodied in the nerves cells that make them up biologically, but the imagined world that is the product of those nerve cells exists in synchrony with the cells themselves. This metaphor can be extended further, with persons being like nerve cells, interconnected and forming networks of ideas and symbols through the communication arts, but also physically through the physical acts that unite us: breathing, touch and nearness. This new world of *worlds within worlds* is the new social and psychological realm in which we live and work. The operative idea of reality here is that of the palimpsest, instead of a linear sequence of frames.

Every person is like a pioneer now, forging a new identity, a new homestead in a brand new world. The top-down rules and structures and certainties of the old modernist world are gone, replaced by a network that actually gives individuals a voice. That is a challenge most people are not yet ready to

meet. This is the grand opportunity that the new interactive era poses: it is the era of public relations, the era of relationships—not only between people but between the multiple selves within a person: the social, digital, spiritual, bodily and imagined selves that make up a person now. To be successful, organizations and brands have to find a way to help bring a comforting narrative, a storyline that makes sense to this new fragmented individual. For that, they need storytellers and managers of image and sound. We need strategists who have started charting the new inner and outer worlds that digital life and connectivity have opened. We need professionals who follow an ethic that understands the fluid nature of conversation, learning and the evolving fragmented self.

The winners in the new profession of public relations will be those who understand how to create narratives, communities, relationships, reputations and the audio-visual languages that will enable organizations to enter into conversations with prosumers. From the organizational perspective, the winners will understand strategy, analytics and quantification from the point of view of public relations—they will understand how to make the case for the work they do and justify it to other branches of the corporate tree. The problem is that most corporations are structured in the old, modernist, top-down way and fitting the new, interpersonal practice of effective public relations into them will be a challenge that requires its own language, standards and ethical understandings.

This issue captures many of these ideas. Celebrated documentarian Ira Basen offers an excellent commentary on the origins of public relations, starting in WWI, that captures the link between PR and the modernist project. Another commentary, by Elena Yunusov presents the public relations practices of Ontario's outspoken Ombudsperson who is busy being a part of the public conversation. In a public lecture delivered to the October Residency of the McMaster-Syracuse Master of Communications Management program by Maria Russell, professor of public relations at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, Russel shares the wisdom she has gained from her long and successful journey as a practitioner, professional association leader and professor in the realm of professional communication. This lecture is complemented by an interview by Terry Flynn with Paolo Nassar, professor at the University of Sao Paolo and longtime executive director of Aberje, the professional society for professional communicators in Brazil. Nassar touches on the evolution of public relations and describes what he feels constitutes a good professional education and training for new practitioners.

In the peer reviewed research articles section, in *"Can we all agree? Building the case for symbolic interactionsim as the theoretical origins of public relations"* Sandra Braun offers her reflection on the theoretical groundings of public relations. Christine Szustaczek offers a case study that exemplifies the power of applying theory to practice in the higher education public relations sector in *"Turning belief into action: An exploratory case study applying the building belief model to an anonymous college in Ontario."* Marc Holmes offers an internal communications case study, *"Relocation as a catalyst for change: How leadership empowered employees and achieved organizational change at Sanofi Canada"* which examines how change management initiatives affected a corresponding transformation in the organization's culture of work. Holly Unruh and Philip Savage have conducted a preliminary examination of the effectiveness of the hybrid learning model—residency plus online learning—as it is implemented in the McMaster-Syracuse Master of Communications Management program, with intriguing results, as reported in their *"From MBA to MCM: A pedagogical examination of blended residency-online teaching and learning in graduate professional communications."* Felix Zogning explores the analytical side of financial communication in his *"Divulgation volontaire d'informations non-financières et valorisation boursière des firmes"* in which he claims that voluntary disclosure has increased the market values of publicly traded corporations.

In this issue, we are beginning a new, fully peer-reviewed "Short Case Study" section, edited by Dave Scholz, managing partner at Leger360 and a founding faculty member of the McMaster-Syracuse Master of Communications Management program. In this section, we aim to capture successful and iconic case studies of professional communications practice in a brief and readable format. Despite this being our first call for such manuscripts, we received a very significant number of submissions. For this inaugural section, we have chosen two, one from Strategic Objectives on their brilliant *White Cashmere* campaign and a second from Argyle Communications on their landmark *American Peanut Council* campaign. Each of these was evaluated by two blind peer reviewers and selected from the 10 submissions we received. You will also find that each is in a very different format, with the White Cashmere study presented in a narrative format, whereas the Peanut Council study is presented in a bulleted structure. We will continue to experiment with format in the next two issues and consider reader feedback before settling on one or the other or another—or, possibly, preserving the diversity of format.

This issue also contains two book reviews. Brady Wood echoes Sandra Braun's concern with PR strategy and theory in his fascinating comparative

book review of Roger Martin's *The Design of Business*, Joan Magretta's *Understanding Michael Porter* and Alan Lafley's *Playing to Win*. His book review discusses how professional communication can expand from the strategic foundations laid by James Grunig. I contribute this issue's second review in which I consider Clive Veroni's excellent *Spin: How Politics Has the Power to Turn Marketing on its Head*. I claim that while Veroni's book contains many valuable insights into the model that political communication suggests for marketing, in fact, what Veroni means when he says "political communication" is really the emerging field of public relations and communications management, or the converging field of professional communication.

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