

# Mediated Politics

COMMUNICATION IN THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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13. For 1948 to 1992, these data are from Stanley and Niemi (1995, p. 96). For 1996, data are from Gallup polls published on Hotline on January 10, August 30, and October 4. Calculations were made as in the previous note.
14. Data are from same source as in Table 12.2.
15. *Newsweek*, November 4, 1968, p. 28.

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## The Big Spin: Strategic Communication and the Transformation of Pluralist Democracy

W. Lance Bennett and Jarol B. Manheim

Among the several competing notions of how democracy functions, pluralism – the idea that the views of citizens are effectively and equitably represented through competing organized interests – has long held special appeal. The pluralist model is often offered as the democratic ideal in cases such as the United States, where interest formations do not display the broad structural coherence of the "corporatism" common to many European nations. Our analysis applies primarily to the United States, but we draw upon important efforts to bridge the theoretical gap between pluralist and corporatist systems, including Putnam's comparative analyses of civic group life in the United States (1995) and Italy (1993), and, most importantly, Dahl's (1989) general theory of polyarchy.

Dahl defines a general continuum of polyarchy (rule by many), ranging between voter selection of officials in free and fair elections at the lower limit, and an upper limit defined as the democratic ideal of equal governance by all. This ideal is approximated by equal control of the policy agenda and equal opportunity for inclusion in policy decision processes (1989, p. 222). Like many democratic theorists before him, Dahl regards the quality and communication of political information as central to the evolution of democracy. What is relevant for our purposes is that Dahl identifies an informational dilemma common to most advanced polyarchic systems – the capture of many policy processes and decisions by policy elites whose information gives them an exclusive power (i.e., power that often excludes general publics) in complex decisions. Dahl argues that if polyarchy is to evolve beyond a state of capture by policy elites, the key lies in maximizing the free flow of information in the policy process. He recommends creating inde-

pendent communication channels for transmitting reliable knowledge to citizens, and for facilitating broadly inclusive deliberation on related policy decisions (1989, p. 338).

Our ongoing research on the uses of information and communication by various organized interests in the United States indicates movement in just the opposite direction of that advocated by Dahl. In particular, policy organizations all across the political spectrum have learned to use communication technologies to target the smallest audiences likely to be helpful to their political aims, and to deliver information that is designed not to promote informed, deliberative engagement on the part of those selected citizens. Rather, information is typically publicized to mobilize and demobilize segments of the public to serve narrow strategic objectives, often masking the identity or intent of the communicator in the process.

We can begin to make this point clear by defining two key terms of analysis. *Information transparency* refers to the clear identification of groups sponsoring a political initiative, a clear statement of their purposes for sponsoring it, and disclosure of the known risks and benefits that may flow from the initiative. *Information inclusiveness* refers to the degree to which political information is distributed broadly to publics who might be interested in participating in (deliberating about and deciding on) an issue if they understood its implications more clearly.

In place of transparency and inclusiveness, we observe growing political communication practices that subordinate the identities and motives of the participants, along with the full disclosure of their objectives, with the overriding end of achieving pragmatic political victories. As explained by Jamieson in Chap. 15, both electoral and issue advocacy campaigns often involve deception in the messages and the ways the sources of those messages are identified in communications with target audiences. Indeed, the very transformation of publics into exclusive target audiences is a blow to the democratic ideal of publics as inclusive deliberative bodies, as explained by Gandy in Chap. 7. It is also clear, as Underwood notes in Chap. 5, that these developments in communication practices are associated with a commercially driven media system in which news and citizen information values are easily displaced by the business values of the industrial conglomerates that own much of the national information system. All of these changes in the political communication process recommend rethinking both the research agenda and the theoretical frameworks of our field.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED FROM THE OLD PLURALISM TO THE NEW?

An assumption at the core of pluralist democratic theory is that the competition of organized interests produces enlightened citizen participation. The validity of this assumption is challenged by at least three conditions that distinguish today's society from that of an earlier era: the decline of group memberships, the rise of technologies for assembling audiences from targeted individuals, and the routine engagement of government processes as much for image purposes as for securing policy remedies.

First, interest formations of an earlier pluralist era may have reflected larger, more stable, party and labor formations and higher levels of civic group involvement by individuals. Group origins of interests not only provide people with a socially grounded experiential basis for judging the political information they receive, but personal membership in groups offers individuals a useful information heuristic or short cut in the form of interpretive cues transmitted by group leaders.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is probably no accident that what we call strategic communication campaigns have evolved over the same period in which the structural coherence of pluralist society has also fragmented (Putnam 1995; Bennett 1998).

Second, communication in earlier eras of pluralist democracy was comparatively uncorrupted by recent technologies for "creating publics" by assessing citizen attitudes and shaping messages designed to mobilize those attitudes into expressions of public opinion. The centrality of these communication technologies may be magnified by the protection of their uses through expanded definitions of free speech, as explained in the Chaps. 15 and 16 by Jamieson and Baker, respectively.

Third, a simple view from the old pluralism is that groups take information to government in order to enlighten and persuade courts, legislatures, and executives of rational solutions to public problems. It is well known that government has long been the primary staging area for so-called hard news about politics (Bennett 1996). However, in the new political environment, groups may engage government primarily to reach target audiences (which may be no larger than other government officials and policy elites) with news that shapes images, damages opponents, disguises motives, and authenticates political claims. This is an extension of Edelman's (1964) vision with a technological sophisti-

cation that few students of contemporary democracy have either anticipated or addressed adequately.

In this emerging neopluralist order, the idea of stable groups embodying enduring and relatively transparent interests must at least make room for an alternative reality in which interests arise outside of stable group contexts and communication processes construct publics in strategic ways. This strategic communication — the *scientific engineering and targeting of messages that subordinate the ideals of deliberation and transparency to the achievement of narrow political goals* — calls in question the definitions of groups, information, and interests in the old pluralist models.

Before turning to the workings of strategic communication campaigns, we address several questions that can be raised about the argument thus far. Perhaps the most obvious question is: *Hasn't deception always been a central element of politics?* For example, Timothy Cook reminded us (personal communication) that a campaign no less important than the one advocating the adoption of the U.S. Constitution was waged by a broad ideological coalition of actors representing themselves as a pseudonymous fellow named Publius. We also acknowledge that the history of politics and public opinion in this century can be written in terms of the uses of often deceptive public relations techniques to "engineer consent" among the governed (Ewen 1996).

Our response is that deception, whether anecdotal or historical, must be evaluated in a theoretical context such as our general framework of transparency and inclusiveness of communication within societies undergoing declines in group-based politics. Examined from this perspective, it is clear that *The Federalist* can be defended as an effort to disguise potentially divisive group differences in order to draw diverse readers into common deliberation about complex choices. By contrast, the historical origins of public relations and the engineering of consent are commonly traced to the antipluralist, elitist perspectives of Edward L. Bernays, Ivy Lee, and Walter Lippmann, among others (Ewen 1996). Yet, we now detect a move beyond public relations as a largely intuitive and sporadically employed publicity tool, to the systemic adoption of more scientific methods for shaping images and promoting or undermining causes by political groups large and small, public and private, left and right (Greife and Linsky 1995). If we detect a movement toward a more systematic corruption of public information quality, should we excuse it on grounds that it is a mere compounding of past problems with democracy?

A second obvious question is: *Does the shift to an increasingly mediated political process mean that individuals are continually deceived by the interest organizations that bombard them?* No. Our point is not that individuals are inevitably political dupes in modern information games. A more serious problem may be that most people, most of the time, are not even addressed in modern information games. And many of those who are targeted encounter information that is alternately confusing, cynicism-inducing, or hard to validate independently of the media experience that delivered it. True, as Zaller argues in Chap. 12, publics display remarkable independence of mind on some judgments such as voting choice and presidential approval, even when — as during the Clinton-Lewinsky impeachment scandal — dominant media framing might suggest a stampede of supporters away from the president. We also accept the idea that people may deploy various heuristics to sort through the barrage of daily news and political information (Sniderman et al. 1991). All of these points conceded, however, none of these rational public theories strays far beyond Dahl's (1989) standards for the lowest levels of polyarchy. Instead, these theories leave information environments largely unexamined, while characterizing citizens as inherently lazy. We simply propose to add to our understanding of democratic communication by exploring more broadly how meaning systems may selectively engage, exclude, and motivate people.

A final obvious question is this: *Does this mean that there are no instances of high-quality public deliberation in contemporary politics?* The answer is that different qualities of policy debate may occur on different issues, and that something like public deliberation with good information undoubtedly occurs on some highly publicized and politically contested issues (Page 1996). For example, Chap. 3, by William Gamson, convinces us that a relatively high quality public deliberation has gone on in America for more than two decades on the issue of abortion. We note, however, that abortion is an issue that has a social group base that is both strong and diverse (e.g., churches and women's groups). These groups tend to be relatively transparent in identifying themselves, disclosing their goals, and rebutting opponents' information with great volumes of fact and moral argument. The dramatic human choices involved with the issue also invite widespread personal engagement and stimulate huge volumes of information through both news and entertainment media. As Delli Carpini and Williams argue in Chap. 8, such issues are prime *infotainment* fare and may well break down the gate-keeping capacity (and therefore the effectiveness of attempts to manage

the content) of the news. We readily concede that such issues are not easily captured by strategic communication techniques, and we also note that they are not the typical policy fare.

#### NEOPLURALISM AND THE EVOLUTION OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

What is needed is a democratic theory for the new communication era — one that recognizes and takes into account the greater sophistication of human knowledge and the willingness to apply it for political purposes. For ours is an era when a half-century of social scientific research has generated substantial understanding of the cognitive processing of individual stimuli and of how those stimuli flow through whole economic and political systems. Put another way, ours is an era when those with the requisite resources to manipulate the democratic system for their advantage have more capability to accomplish that than ever before — and there are many such people in play. For example, one estimate suggests that reporters are outnumbered by communications professionals by a margin of 130,000 journalists to 150,000 communication practitioners, and that the gap is growing (Dowie 1995).

We believe that pervasive uses of strategic communication are now altering the political behaviors of other important “pluralist” institutions such as labor unions, cause groups, and business interests. As an empirical exercise, this new democratic theory must explain and predict a broad range of newly observed political behaviors. As a normative exercise, it must provide guidance for judging these evolving practices and recommending policies to regulate them.

We believe the starting point for developing this neopluralist theory is through an examination of the growth and dimensions of strategic political communication campaigns. The communication strategies that characterize such campaigns are direct descendants of the techniques developed over the last four decades by political marketers as they have sought to advance particular candidates, policies, or ideologies. Among them are appeals to emotion rather than to reason, the reliance on graphic verbal and visual imagery, thematic simplification, and a frequent resort to intense and unyielding negativity. Because these techniques have migrated beyond the electoral arena, with its media spotlight, formal and informal accountability, and other self-regulatory mechanisms, however, their use is far less subject to any type of constraint. In strategic communication campaigns, as opposed to their

electoral cousins, there are no inherent limits on time or resources, no meaningful reporting requirements, no systematic media or public scrutiny, no prohibition on channeling messages through seemingly independent surrogates, no boundary between communication efforts and other forms of advocacy, and no expectation of ethical behavior. In other words, there are no rules. In this arena, strategy is king, and whatever it is that “works” is done (Manheim 1998, p. 1).

These campaigns have in many cases replaced traditional grass roots actions and social pressure with *astroturf* (i.e., artificial) groups and electronic publics. Strategic campaigns transcend conventional political modes such as public relations and lobbying by fully integrating image (e.g., ads, PR events, news story placement, editorials) and power (e.g., judicial, regulatory, legislative, protest, boycott) tactics to advance partisan causes and damage vulnerable opponents. Campaign technologies have been advanced by both the left and the right, and by nonprofit organizations and big business. For example, the rise of the Republican right marks an important chapter in the strategic campaign book (Ferguson and Rogers 1986), as does the resurgence of labor activism centered around communication campaigns (Perry 1987).

#### LABOR CAMPAIGNS: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

Recognizing the development of important communication techniques by the labor movement is a useful corrective to common assumptions in the communication literature that communication power is the nearly exclusive purview of government and big business, or that the evolving communication practices of the left are somehow more pure than those of the right. Labor variants of strategic communication campaigns, often called *corporate campaigns*, were developed by labor unions as they faced serious erosions of membership, public support, and power. Over the past half-century, through good times and bad, workers have increasingly opted out of the labor movement. Today, only 9.8 percent of the private sector work force is unionized, a decline of nearly 40 percent since 1983 (Manheim 1998). By the mid-1970s, the more forward-looking labor leaders had recognized the emerging crisis that faced their movement to be a long-term structural phenomenon. More importantly, they had identified a potential solution — a move away from their reliance on the National Labor Relations Board, the collective bargaining process, the strike, and the other trappings of traditional labor-management relations, and toward the then-emerging social technology of strategic communication. These leaders saw that,

by attacking the reputations of companies, either directly or through surrogates, they could create real pressure of a degree and type that management was ill equipped to resist. Then, in exchange for union recognition, contract improvements or other concessions, they could make the pressure go away. Better still, they could often accomplish this without resorting to the traditional — and for a union very costly — last step in labor-management disputes, the strike.<sup>2</sup>

The trend in the years since has been toward more, and increasingly sophisticated, campaigns, reflecting a transformation of the labor movement as well. In many ways, the key outcome of the 1995 AFL-CIO election was the replacement of an old guard with a leadership experienced in and committed to this new style of labor activity. In the words of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, "The challenge is to find ways for working people to support each other in their struggles and to plan sophisticated strategies to use media coverage, political clout, community organizing, international support, and even pressure from investors and major companies to persuade employers to come to terms." (Sweeney 1996, p. 142). At this point, perhaps 100 companies have been the targets of corporate campaigns by organized labor. Among the most significant have been attacks upon Bridgestone/Firestone, Caterpillar, Eastern Air Lines, Food Lion, International Paper, Hormel, JP Stevens, Ravenswood Aluminum, and the United Parcel Service (UPS).

The corporate campaign can be characterized as wide-ranging and often long-running economic, political, and psychological warfare waged by a union or other entity against a corporation. The objectives of campaigns generally involve disrupting the target company's relationships with such vital constituencies as its customers, employees, shareholders, bankers, vendors, regulators, and the general public. As described in a recent court case, corporate-campaign tactics "may include, but are not limited to, litigation, political appeals, requests that regulatory agencies investigate and pursue employer violations of state or federal law, and negative publicity campaigns aimed at reducing the employer's goodwill with employees, investors, or the general public" (*Food Lion* 1997). By undermining the corporation's good name — or by the mere credible threat of doing so — those who wage such campaigns seek to pressure its management into complying with their wishes on a range of issues varying from labor contracts, to environmental or human rights practices, to altered competitive postures.

Communication strategy is the central one of many components of a typical corporate campaign. Some others include the filing of class action and other lawsuits, initiation of regulatory complaints through various government agencies, encouragement of congressional hearings by labor- or cause-friendly panels designed to embarrass the target company, other types of legislative initiatives, attacks on the quality or safety of the target company's products or practices, shareholder actions (unions often have sizable holdings in the stock of targeted companies through their pension plans), and secondary boycotts of companies or individuals associated with the target company. Such conventional tactics are increasingly developed around a communication strategy that has the potential to reshape the fundamental perceptions of the company among its key audiences and, in the process, to generate the pressure on management that can lead to success. In this sense, for example, the UPS strike in 1997 was less a direct power tactic than an integral component of the Teamsters' comprehensive communication strategy.<sup>3</sup>

#### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNICATION IN STRATEGIC CAMPAIGNS

Whether we are talking about corporate campaigns waged by labor or about the many variants of strategic campaigns waged by parties, cause groups, and business, common communication strategies are relatively straightforward and remarkably consistent. The basic elements of strategy include:

- Identify the vulnerabilities of the target. This is done through surveys and focus groups, through legal and economic analyses of public documents, and through what the labor movement initially referred to as "power analysis" — assessing the structural and constituency relationships upon which any particular opponent depends.
- Identify the target audiences. Once a target's vulnerabilities have been identified, the next step is to determine which audiences represent potential pressure points on those vulnerabilities, and to determine, again through research, how susceptible those audiences are to influence or manipulation.
- Develop and test messages and themes. Just as in a political campaign, messages are developed and woven into themes designed to



place the campaign sponsor on the high moral ground and the target on the defensive.

- Legitimize themes and messages through third parties. In many cases, partisan sponsors can communicate more effectively with publics (who often hold negative opinions about those sponsors) if they create or enlist surrogate groups to take actions and make announcements.<sup>4</sup>

#### CAMPAIGNS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTEREST GROUP POLITICS

As a direct result of the effectiveness of these communication strategies, we have seen in recent years a proliferation of strategic communication campaigns. For example, the persistent personal attacks on Bill Clinton, including the uses of lawsuits to publicize image-damaging claims, appeared to have the coherence of a strategic campaign. Corporations commonly invent consumer groups to create appearances of public support for various regulatory policy changes from deregulation of telecommunications markets to lowering fuel or environmental standards in the auto industry. And in recent years strategic campaigns have proliferated among groups that typically describe themselves as members of the "progressive community." This would include such groups as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Rainforest Action Network. The "Merchants of Shame" campaigns by NOW — on its own against the brokerage firm Salomon Smith Barney, and together with the Rainbow Coalition and the Rainforest Action Network against the Japanese conglomerate Mitsubishi — are cases in point.

Perhaps the most interesting and complex campaigns involve combat among business interests both in the consumer marketplace and in the promotion of interests within government institutions. In this variant, a target company's business competitors, often working through surrogates to mask or reframe their initiative, attack an industry-dominant company in an attempt to weaken it and distract its management, allowing them to claim portions of its market share.

Increasingly common in business campaigns is a kind of political piling-on in which unlikely campaign partners spanning business competition, labor, and cause groups see different political advantages in joining a campaign against a vulnerable and newsworthy target.<sup>5</sup> The involvement of unlikely and opportunistic partners, the creation of

surrogate groups, the increasing resort to Internet organizing, and the attacks from so many sides mean that information transparency (who is doing what, why, and with what methods) often eludes journalists, publics, and sometimes even the targets themselves. One of the clearest examples of such a campaign to date is the one waged initially by corporate competitors and consumer surrogates, and later joined by labor, against the corporate megalith of the 1990s, Microsoft.

#### THE NEW INTEREST POLITICS AND THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST MICROSOFT

The elements of the Microsoft campaign closely resemble the practices outlined above.

- *Use of litigation.* Microsoft has been the subject of considerable litigation related to its market dominance. The antitrust action brought against the company by the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the attorneys general of twenty states is only the most obvious of these actions. Our research indicates that business competitors were instrumental in engaging both executive and legislative institutions and framing the subject matter of regulatory actions, hearings, and litigation. Not to be overlooked are the series of more specific trade-practices lawsuits brought by Sun Microsystems and other Microsoft competitors, many after the government's filing (Helft 1998; Glasscock 1998). There was also mention in the trade press of a potential shareholders' lawsuit, though none has been filed at this writing (Berst 1998). In the midst of the DOJ trial, the Consumers Federation of America announced its intention to file a \$10 billion class action suit based on Microsoft's pricing practices. This pattern of cluster litigation is typical of a corporate campaign.

- *Litigation public relations.* Also typical of such campaigns are efforts to characterize the opposing sides in the dispute in such a way that one or the other may be aided or impeded. In this regard, it is interesting to note the spate of media articles about the attorneys for Microsoft and its nemesis, Netscape, around the time the antitrust case became public. Netscape lawyer Gary Reback and Justice Department outside counsel David Boies were frequently praised, while Microsoft's William Neukom was attacked (e.g., Daly 1997; Hamm 1998). The objective — which in our judgment was

achieved — was to put Microsoft's legal team on the public relations defensive.

- *Reliance on surrogates.* Though Microsoft's competitors are, as we shall demonstrate, behind the scenes of nearly every attack on the company, the campaign itself has been waged largely by surrogates. Among them are: Ralph Nader, the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), Net Action, and the Project to Promote Competition and Innovation in the Digital Age (ProComp). For his part, Nader challenged Microsoft on privacy issues as early as 1995, when he addressed a meeting sponsored by EPIC and raised the antitrust issue in 1997 (EPIC Alert 1995). Also in 1997, Nader sponsored a conference on "Assessing Microsoft," which brought together a large number of Microsoft's critics (Clausing 1997). EPIC is a project of the Fund for Constitutional Government, one of whose other "projects" played a central role in labor's corporate campaign against the Food Lion supermarket chain.<sup>6</sup> A third player, Net Action, which spearheaded a "consumers" campaign against Microsoft, is tied to EPIC through interlocks with the Board of Directors of yet another group, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility.<sup>7</sup> The remaining major player, ProComp, took the lead in hiring a Washington lobbying team to support the campaign, a team that includes both Bob Dole and Robert Bork (Chandrasekaran 1998). Behind this coalition of consumer and other groups, however, are some interesting names. EPIC is cochaired by Microsoft competitor Sun Microsystems, and, at the time of the DOJ action, listed the primary adversary in the case, Netscape, as a major benefactor.<sup>8</sup> Serving on Net Action's board is an attorney who represents (or has represented) Netscape, Oracle Computing, and Sun Microsystems, as well as the Consumer Federation of America. In addition, Net Action lists Hewlett-Packard Laboratories as a major contributor.<sup>9</sup> And the members of ProComp include Netscape, Sun, and Oracle, as well as other companies that have thus far chosen to remain anonymous (Chandrasekaran 1998).

- *Issuance of a "white paper."* It is typical in a corporate campaign for attacking parties to issue formal research reports and policy statements designed to define the issues in the campaign in the most favorable light. Several of these reports have been issued in the Microsoft campaign by groups such as Net Action and Corporate Watch, another frequent campaign participant. Report titles tend

to have clever names that play on words or themes closely associated with the target company. Illustrative titles in this case include: "From MS Word to MS World: How Microsoft Is Building A Global Monopoly" and "Microsoft: One World Operating System."

- *Publishing a "Monitor."* Essential Information, Ralph Nader's core organization, has for several years published *Multinational Monitor*, a magazine that reports on and evaluates the activities of large, but not always multinational, corporations. Companies that are targets of labor-based corporate campaigns are often the subjects of highly critical articles in this publication, which are then cited by the relevant union as further evidence of corporate malfeasance. In effect, the publication helps to legitimize the corporate campaign's themes. In the present instance, *Multinational Monitor* published a report in 1995 attacking Microsoft, and a parallel effort was underway on the Internet, where Net Action published a newsletter titled *Microsoft Monitor*.<sup>10</sup>

- *Reliance on legislative and regulatory action.* Communication strategies often include the use of legislative and regulatory processes to increase the pressure on the target company, and, in the process, to make headlines creating the impression that the company is troubled or embattled. Access to government agencies and officials was used effectively by different actors in the campaign against Microsoft. In Congress, Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah served as the leading critic of Microsoft (Alvarez 1998; Rivlin 1998). Perhaps not coincidentally, Hatch received campaign contributions from individuals or PACs associated with several of the Microsoft competitors. As for the regulatory agencies involved, the Justice Department's antitrust lawsuit was stimulated by complaints and supported by legal briefs from a consortium of Microsoft's Silicon Valley rivals. The subsequent filing of a similar claim against Microsoft ally Intel Corporation by the Federal Trade Commission expanded the offensive. The Intel litigation was settled within weeks of that company's testifying against Microsoft in the DOJ case.

- *High-ground thematics.* In a corporate campaign, and in strategic communication campaigns more generally, the attacker always seeks to position itself on the moral high ground. This is typically accomplished by defining the campaign itself as an effort to redress some grievance with which the public can identify. In the Microsoft campaign, Net Action defined itself as a consumer protection

group — a status conveyed by Ralph Nader's participation in the campaign — and the campaign itself as a "Consumer Choice Campaign." By some measures in some polls, public opinion has actually favored Microsoft, with as many as 75 percent of respondents opposing government intervention and a four-to-one margin in favor of integrating a browser with the Windows operating system. The same polls, however, show 80-percent public support for enforcing antitrust laws (*Fortune* 1998; Taft 1998). By filing on these latter grounds, then, the company's antagonists played to their strength. However, abstract polls about antitrust or product development may not tap underlying image damage done to a company over the long course of a campaign, as indicated in the following list.

- *Personalization.* Finally, a common element in many corporate campaigns is personalization — focusing the attack on the CEO or some other prominent individual rather than on an abstract entity like a corporation. The ACTWU attack on the Farah family set this pattern at the outset, and the multiunion strike that drove Eastern Air Lines out of business and its CEO, Frank Lorenzo, out of the airline industry forever refined it to near perfection. Now, in effect, Microsoft's Bill Gates is being defined as the Frank Lorenzo of high tech. Once seen as a hero and role model, Gates is increasingly portrayed as a robber baron, compared, for instance, to John D. Rockefeller (Klein 1998). One Internet site actually featured a real-time counter of Gates' personal wealth,<sup>11</sup> and cartoonists increasingly portray him as an all-consuming monster (e.g., Gateszilla) or as the toll collector on the information highway. *Brill's Content* magazine went so far as to publish Gates' mug shot from a 1970s arrest on its September 1998 cover. When so many stereotypes and formulas enter the media information stream, news narratives begin to take on common frames, and "the story" begins to write itself. Even journalism reviews may begin to cue their journalist-readers about how to play the story, as in the screaming cover of *Columbia Journalism Review* that appeared at the same time the justice department filed its antitrust case: WILL GATES CRUSH NEWSPAPERS? The article was filled with both sourced and unattributed references to Gates and Microsoft that included "software behemoth," "media baron," "the most powerful economic force in the United States," "lust to own the world," "evil company," "naked ambition," and "the Seattle slasher" (Hickey 1997).

The results? While the protracted legal cases churned through the courts, the headlines increasingly told the story of an arrogant, embattled, aggressive company whose CEO had pretensions of ruling the world. Even as Microsoft began to win its early legal battles, it showed signs of losing the public relations war. Various poll results from early in the campaign suggested erosion in public support, particularly among important segments of its customer base. For example, a poll of online users sponsored by *Fortune* magazine showed that 43.5% agreed that Microsoft engaged in unfair marketing, while a large neutral block of nearly 30% waited in the wings to form their opinions. Fully 62.7% agreed that Microsoft had too much power in the computer software market. And 51% agreed with the Justice Department in the conflict, contrasted with only 25.5% siding with Microsoft.<sup>12</sup> Another survey by Techtel, a market research company that tracks brand reactions to technology companies, reported a 10% decline in favorable opinion about Microsoft (to a still strong 70%) among business users during 1997, the year in which the campaign emerged on all fronts. Positive opinion among all consumers fell 5% (to 67%). Negative opinion among general consumers doubled (to 8%), and Microsoft's "negatives" among business users increased to 19.4% from 11.5% during 1997 (Markoff 1998). In response, Microsoft released results of a poll conducted by Hart and Teeter showing that the company still topped the list of most admired companies in America.<sup>13</sup> The battle for public opinion was clearly engaged, and it is this strategic communication battle that can become more important politically and economically than the specific effects of particular legal or regulatory actions.

## CONCLUSION

It is true that many of the elemental techniques of strategic political communication were developed years ago in public relations efforts to promote corporations and their products, and then in the political arena to sell candidates to voters in elections. However, the techniques of market and voter research, message development, advertising, and free-media management have now been transported to new arenas where they are of increasing importance, but where their use and its consequences have to date been little studied and are little understood. That lack of understanding, however, by no means renders them inconsequential. To the contrary, these forms of political communication are likely to play an increasingly important role in political life in the future.

The following characteristics of the new interest group politics constitute potential threats to the ideal of enlightened public policy deliberation by masking the identities, motives, and goals of the very groups who "go public" with their causes.

- First, the group structure of the new pluralism is often a symbolic construction. Many of the consumer, citizen, and public interest groups, alliances, and coalitions prominently featured in communication campaigns are virtual organizations that exist primarily (often exclusively) on letterheads, on the Internet, or as offices within other, well-known organizations whose partisanship is well established. In the pluralistic ideal, by contrast, it is established and politically identifiable groups who cue both publics and public officials in thinking about issues and government policies.
- Second, when established partisan groups enter the strategic communication picture it is often as a downstream victim, or as a party privileged by a legal or regulatory action (which they themselves initiated). This blurring of causal roles in political action chains further confuses the issues and the partisan positions that are useful for judging the merits of political conflicts.
- Third, the outward-looking emphasis of campaigns and the coordinated scripting of acts by primary and surrogate groups help hide the motives and interest conflicts among partners in broad coalitions. This often enables players to appear on the side of a (good) coalition against an (evil) opponent, even though they may engage in similar business or political practices as the targeted opponent.
- Fourth, since news and publicity from multiple campaign sources reinforce similar themes, news stories often report the simplest and most dramatic narratives, and miss the underlying complexities of campaigns. Unraveling the group networks and interests in a typical campaign would require both increased commitments by news organizations to enterprise reporting, and a simultaneous willingness to turn down the dramatic story ideas and public events orchestrated by campaign strategists and placed with news organizations. Trends in the news business are moving in the opposite directions.

Because of these informational characteristics, strategic communication campaigns tend to loop back on themselves. For example, negative

news about campaign targets that is reported by prestige news organizations is typically used to convince officials that those opponents are, indeed, guilty as charged, and need to be (further) investigated or regulated. Such investigations, in turn, may prompt journalists to tell even more dramatic stories based on information placed by partisan sources who may recede into the background of news accounts as surrogates assume the role of primary sources. As a result, the core economic and political interests at stake in many campaigns may never enter public debate. As these information cycles play out in the press and through political institutions, the targets of campaigns may end up modifying their behaviors, not in response to principle or public interest, but in response to the brute power of the campaign waged against them. This, we submit, is an inversion of the ideal relations among groups, governments, information, and publics in democratic society.

As media campaigns grow in technical sophistication, the basic assumptions of pluralist democracy become harder to sustain. For example, interested parties may hide behind surrogates who mask and otherwise misrepresent the positions of their sponsors. Community-based groups are increasingly displaced by centralized organizations that sustain memberships through direct mail, and other communication strategies that render members less involved in group interest formation processes. Publics who form opinions about issues passing through the political arena are increasingly assembled as targeted audiences whose understanding of problems is based on market research about their own private fears and feelings rather than more thematic social analysis. Finally, strategic coalitions of groups formed to defeat political opponents or economic competitors may associate groups with principles that they do not seriously support. All of these tendencies challenge the basic assumptions of information transparency, stability of interests, and political coherence of interest organizations on which the quality of democratic communication among specific interests, general publics, and policy makers depends. It is a challenge of some consequence.

#### NOTES

1. The decline of civic group memberships also implies the weakening of the two-step flow of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1956), as individuals become increasingly separated from civic groups and their related information cueing systems.
2. The conventional history of this phenomenon identifies the 1976 campaign against textile giant J. P. Stevens by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Unions

- (ACTWU) as the first corporate campaign. Indeed, it was during that effort that the term "corporate campaign" was first developed by Ray Rogers, an ACTWU staff member who went on to form Corporate Campaigns, Inc., the first consulting company devoted to assisting unions in applying this new technology (Janley and Meranto 1990; Perry 1988, p. 105). But the roots of the J. P. Stevens campaign actually trace directly to an attack by the same union on Farah Manufacturing, a nonunion, Texas-based clothing manufacturer a few years earlier (Perry 1987).
3. From a corporate campaign perspective, UPS was an interesting target. The company had a long history of friendly relations with the Teamsters, and many, if not most, of its top managers had begun their careers at the company as Teamsters themselves. Moreover, UPS had a very positive corporate image among the public, strong financials, a reputation for efficiency and customer service, and good relations with its customers generally. And it was privately held, eliminating shareholder and other potential pressure points. But UPS had a particular vulnerability that the union was uniquely positioned to exploit. UPS workers – unlike those at many other companies – had names and faces rather than mere numbers. They were not just known to their customers one-on-one, but they effectively defined the company for those customers. If those workers should become, or appear to be, disillusioned, the image of the company would be undermined. That outcome would best be assured through a strike. So the strike, rather than an act of last resort, became a central component of the union's communication planning. The union's core message was perhaps best summarized by John Wayne Garrett, the southern regional coordinator for the UPS strike, who told the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, "The public knows what is happening to UPS workers is also happening on their jobs." When the media came to the union for comments on the strike, more often than not the union was represented, not by leaders in suits, but by members – many of them women – dressed in jeans. Campaign organizers worked carefully to time their updates, statements, and news conferences to correspond with the natural rhythms of the news cycle. The result? A CNN survey found that 55 percent of the public supported the union; 27 percent, UPS management. This represents a huge gain over general or "standing" opinion about unions in contemporary America (see Nagourney 1997).
4. In the case of unions, for example, attempts to play into popular distrust of big business were often offset by an equivalent distrust of organized labor, as evidenced in part by the aforementioned decline in union membership. Because of their own weak image, unions have found it useful over the years to channel their messages through surrogates and coalitions – some created by the unions expressly to mask their interest in a particular campaign, and some involving existing and often well-known organizations that happened to share interests with labor, including environmentalists, civil and human rights groups, religious societies, and consumer advocates, among others. The use of surrogates, both real and invented, is now standard procedure in interest politics (Perry 1987, pp. 31–38).
5. Origins of these mixed motive interest campaigns can be seen in the AFL-CIO's long-running campaign against Nike, which involved a network of human rights advocates and other surrogates to attack the company's reputation. Nike's principal competitor, Reebok, played an active role in supporting that network. Perhaps in exchange, Reebok, with many labor and human rights practices that initially

appeared similar to Nike's, was not targeted with anything approaching equal vigor. Reebok subsequently capitalized in image terms by issuing its own global human rights award.

6. EPIC Web site. [www.epic.org](http://www.epic.org).
7. Net Action Web site. [www.netaction.org](http://www.netaction.org).
8. EPIC Web site. [www.epic.org](http://www.epic.org).
9. Net Action Web site. [www.netaction.org](http://www.netaction.org).
10. Available on the Net Action Web site.
11. [www.webho.com/WealthClock](http://www.webho.com/WealthClock).
12. Reported in <http://www.pathfinder.com/fortune/1998/980202/onlinepoll2.html>.
13. Hart-Teeter study #5030 released by Microsoft on November 25, 1997.

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## The Impact of the New Media

W. Russell Neuman

Everybody has a hypothesis about the impact of the new media. According to recent reports the new media have variously initiated or reinforced trends that have

- Weakened political party systems
- Offered a new platform for hate speech
- Stimulated a new capacity for grassroots democracy
- Permitted the third world to leapfrog painful stages of industrialization into an information economy
- Robbed children of their childhood and everybody of their sense of place
- Sped up the process of government responses to international crises precluding appropriate deliberation
- Isolated family members from each other
- Permanently stabilized the business cycle
- Exacerbated gaps between information haves and have-nots
- Limited the capacity of authoritarian regimes to control the flow of information within and outside of their realm

Readers will recognize many of these as preowned hypotheses, most not particularly low mileage at that. Much of the evidence of such effects is derived from the selective accumulation of anecdotes.<sup>1</sup> Systematic empirical research struggles for methodologies capable of distinguishing the causal impact of new technologies from other historical trends and cycles. Further, the most radical new technologies such as the Internet are still at early stages of diffusion, challenging the analyst to distinguish the characteristics of early adopters and of early implementations from the underlying character of the technology.