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Advertising and its Adversaries¹

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Abstract

What do we gain – and what might we lose – by treating promotional or strategic communication as a lesser form of address than more ‘authentic,’ ‘informative,’ or ‘factual’ forms? This essay offers a perspective on advertising as communication that is less about manipulation than about its attempts, successful or not, to privilege the receiver. I argue that a more expansive treatment of the convergence of social communication and advertising has the potential not only to sharpen intellectual critique but also to contribute to more reflexive pedagogy. At issue is the recognition that what John Durham Peters called ‘horizons of incommunicability’ may become a starting point for common exchange.

Keywords

advertising, promotional culture, strategic communication

Since 2005 I have taught some version of an undergraduate course on promotional communication, media and consumer culture. It is a ‘media and society’ course and not, as is increasingly common in American colleges, a skills-building or job training class. Students spend the semester considering the implications of a market-driven culture and politics, and develop techniques to analyze how commercial media foster and perpetuate this social reality. Having the opportunity to teach it several times over the years, in a few different countries (Canada, the United States, Finland), has allowed me to undertake a sort of longitudinal analysis of the impact of that class on my students.

I have a shtick I like to do on the first day of class. I introduce the content of the course with a series of examples of brands or advertising campaigns. It soon becomes clear that the majority of the examples refer to Snapple, the brand of tea and flavored drinks. After several minutes of this, I say to the class, ‘All right, I should disclose now that I’ve signed an agreement with Snapple to sponsor our class this semester. I’ll be referring to Snapple quite often during our class as part of the contract terms. Is that all right with everyone?’ Students typically look bewildered or uncomfortable; and then comes the reveal, where I explain that it isn’t true, and that I am making a political point: there are fewer and fewer spaces that the market has not colonized, and the classroom is one of them.

In the fall of 2019, something else happened. On that first day in September, I trotted out my usual dog and pony show, enjoying the way the narrative hooked students in. Then I got to the reveal. I said, ‘How would you feel if you found out I was being sponsored by Snapple to teach this class?’ And a student in the front row said, ‘I’d respect the hustle.’

After *my* initial discomfort and bewilderment, I thought long and hard about that comment. It summarizes, in a nutshell, a theme I’ve reckoned with throughout my academic career. Why do critical communication scholars consistently deal with promotional forms of communication such as advertising, branding and marketing as pure liabilities? What do we gain – and what might we lose – by treating promotional or strategic communication as a lesser form of address than more ‘authentic,’ ‘informative,’ or ‘factual’ forms? Is it possible that our adversarial approach to advertising (and promotional language and practice more broadly) has affected our own ability to communicate, not only with our students but with all of our intended audiences? In this essay, I want to think through these concerns, and consider how John Durham Peters’ provocative book, *Speaking into the Air* (1999), has helped me to do this.

Advertising as Manipulation

A dominant tendency in communication studies is to see advertising essentially as propaganda; or at least, as some kind of manipulation.² This characterization has a

clear historical lineage. Peters (1999) reminds us that the major eras in the twentieth century where communication moved to the center of intellectual concern were after World War I and after World War II (10), particularly during the Cold War (27). It was in the shadows of war that concepts of ‘the masses,’ psychological manipulation, and expert-manufactured consent flourished. These paradigms were centrally concerned with how the democratic potential of the people as a public was hampered by ‘the scale, systematicity, and putative effectiveness of mass-communicated symbols’ (11).

An important, because lasting, example from the era following World War I is found in the philosopher John Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). One of the problems confronting the democratic organization of publics, in Dewey’s eyes, lay in the ‘physical agencies of publicity,’ from advertising and propaganda firms to sensationalist news outfits. In the newly industrialized and technologized post-WWI age, these ‘exploiters of sentiment and opinion’ threatened to eclipse the possibility of public congress. If societies ‘demand communication as a prerequisite’ for participation in shared interests and institutions, the use of communication to manipulate public feeling or provoke cheap responses to unworthy issues precluded the possibility of forming this shared outlook (Dewey, 1927: 143-184). Dewey’s view strongly colored the pervasive critique through the twentieth century of advertising and promotion as fetters on democratic association and communication.³

Even in the 1920s, though, the manipulation view of communication was difficult to maintain. There are at least two reasons for this. First, if mass communication was a powerful force of public control, it was also a means of public enlightenment. Dewey advanced an idea that would become paramount to American democratic thought: that ‘there can be no public without full publicity in respect to all consequences which concern it.’ For people to recognize themselves as members of a public, with the power to pronounce on matters of social importance, these matters must be ‘observed, reported and organized’ through ‘free and systematic communication’ (Dewey, 1927: 143-184). Publicity itself was not the problem. It was, rather, how publicity was achieved and who was doing the publicizing. Inherent in Dewey’s argument about manipulation versus publicness is that there was a ‘right’ kind and a ‘wrong’ kind of publicity (Aronczyk and Espinoza, 2022).

It was the popular press that would become the media of legitimacy; that is, the means to achieve the ‘right’ kind of publicity. As Michael Schudson (1978) has written, it was in this era that the news media emerged from its formerly ‘aesthetic’ role to become the seat of social responsibility, transparency, and ultimate commitment to the project of democracy. If information appeared in the news, this consecrated it as fact. As Dewey and, much later, James Carey (1989) and Benedict Anderson (1991) would observe, the newspaper was mass communication that fostered a public with a sense of itself. If this perspective helped to elevate the news from mere ‘storytelling’ to the ‘informational ideal’ marked by ‘fairness, objectivity, and scrupulous dispassion’ (Schudson, 1978: 90), it also served to distinguish the news profession from its unsavory counterparts: the professions of advertising and public relations. Unlike the right publicity needed for the democratic organization of publics – the news – the wrong kind of publicity was the kind associated with advertising or public relations (Warner, 2005: 30).

In practice, since the early 20th century, the news media and the advertising and PR industries have been inextricably intertwined. This is apparent in terms not only of the dependency of the news business on advertising revenues but also of the reliance of news gathering on press releases and source relations (Davis, 2002; Williams, 2015); the skills and training common to both news makers and publicity agents; the renewed storytelling function of news, which itself takes on a promotional function; and the tendency of mainstream news outlets toward elite indexing (Entman, 2004; c.f. Althaus et al., 1996).

Because the ideal of news is a moral project, an ongoing concern of analysts has been to abdicate the role the news media actually plays in promotional culture. In theory, the traditional church-state division of advertising and editorial content holds, even in today’s platformized media system. In practice, being in possession of ‘the facts’ is a matter of how well one can present one’s own interests as being in the service of the public interest, and using the organ of the news to distribute this information as fact. This is not just a *Fox News* problem or a social media platform problem; it is a larger problem of truth and politics, as Hannah Arendt has described (Arendt, 1967).

Advertising as Culture

A second, related, reason for the weakness of the advertising-as-manipulation argument is that the view of manipulation or exploitation was largely expressed from the perspective of the manipulators. The concept of ‘mass’ was not created by those understood to be part of this mass; it was created by analysts who considered themselves external to (and therefore unaffected by) this mass, and given air by people for whom the concept of mass was useful.⁴ This helps us understand the different valences accorded (by analysts) to ‘mass’ versus ‘public’ – again, one with a positive moral valence and the other a negative one.

Yet the advertising-as-manipulation view leaves out entirely the *meanings* that the so-called manipulated masses might make of the messages they receive. It assumes that one kind of publicity – the ‘right’ kind – informs with factual information and thereby creates a public; while the other, ‘wrong’ kind exerts a kind of mind control over the ‘masses.’ Despite decades of research in media and communication studies demonstrating that audiences possess ‘a range of tactics with which to interpret and respond to the images of advertising, to negotiate meaning through them, or to ignore them’ (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009: 265), we persist in leveling a critique of promotional languages that situates audiences as manipulated masses.

Advertising was never merely a ‘propaganda of commodities,’ as Christopher Lasch termed it back in 1978, or a means to segment the electorate. It was also a form of communication that was deeply embedded in culture. Communication professor Sut Jhally (1987) put it this way: ‘[Advertising’s] real ideological role...is to give us meaning. That is why it is so powerful. If it is manipulative, it is manipulative with respect to a real need: our need to know the world and to make sense of it, our need to know ourselves’ (Jhally, 1987: 197; qtd in Rutherford, 1988: 110).⁵ That statement may have overcompensated somewhat for the earlier claims, but it did recognize that a crucial function of advertising was to form, as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1974) put it, a communicative fence or bridge between people.

Later writers therefore proposed that we critique advertising as a cultural condition rather than an external manipulative force (Wernick, 1991; Powers, 2016). Advertising has been diagnosed as a therapeutic ethos (Lears, 1995), as a promise of transformation

(Berger, 1972), and as a source of social equality (Cohen, 2004). These perspectives adopted alternative critical frameworks through which to view advertising, focusing less on Marxist ideology and more on the politics of identity or the relationship of consumer goods to the social good. If advertising remains manipulative in the sense that it is oriented toward the promotion of beliefs or the production of desires (as advertisers put it, ‘creating demand’), it is nevertheless a system of shared signs and practices, part of a collective world of mutual understanding.

Even in this somewhat more elaborated viewpoint, where advertising is understood as cultural condition rather than as external manipulative force, much intellectual critique still situates it as a ‘low’ cultural condition. The paragraph in Raymond Williams’ *Advertising: The Magic System* that reveals this most strongly is his discussion of society’s relationship to materialism:

It is often said that our society is too materialist, and that advertising reflects this. We are in the phase of a relatively rapid distribution of what are called ‘consumer goods’, and advertising, with its emphasis on ‘bringing the good things to life’, is taken as central for this reason. But it seems to me that in this respect our society is quite evidently not materialist enough, and that this, paradoxically, is the result of a failure in social meanings, values, and ideals (Williams, 1980).

Williams’ point is that if we were truly materialist in a literal sense, the products we interact with would be sufficient in and of themselves. ‘Beer would be enough for us,’ he points out, ‘without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be manly, young in heart, or neighborly.’ As a form of communication designed to convey our cultural condition, advertising shows us that these goods are clearly not enough, that we need the elaborate fantasies of subjecthood and kinship (the ‘magic’ of Williams’ title) which in another kind of society might be more directly available. Advertising is therefore a coverup for the failed promises and broken bubbles of a ruthless capitalist system: fancy packaging and design to hide the workings of a system in constant disrepair.

In the context of digital capitalism, this critique seems even more strongly warranted. The dependence of online platforms on advertising, which in turn relies on ongoing

surveillance and the constant monetization of our attention, is one more indication of our misplaced values and beliefs. Worse still, doomsayers see digital advertising as the next speculative bubble, whose inevitable collapse will reveal the ongoing fraudulence and opacity of the advertising enterprise (Frederik and Martijn, 2019; Hwang, 2020).

Advertising as Communication

For many of us, the entry of advertising and promotion into more and more public and private spaces symbolizes a condition in which we have capitulated to the market; where we've given up our 'real' bases of identification and succumbed to self-interested, profit oriented imperatives. And so, as *critical* scholars, we see our task as needing to remove this veil. We think that by unmasking advertising's manipulations, we will reveal the falsity of people's attachments and the foolishness of this communication.

The problem is that when we do pull back the curtain on this foolishness, we purport to reveal two more things: the stupidity of the consumer and the emptiness of her attachments. And as you might imagine, for some audiences, including our students, this revelation is particularly unwelcome. Not only because arguments about the irrelevance of brands are on weak footing with anyone under the age of 30, but also because most of our communications undergraduate students are going to work in promotion in some capacity. And working in promotion is an expansive category: it is not just PR firms and digital ad exchanges and political campaigns, but newsrooms and NGOs and social movement organizations and technology companies. Advertising and branding are part of their lives, and ours.

If the importance of critique has been to push over totems and pull back curtains, can we now recognize a new kind of critical power, one that seeks to reconcile media and public life by showing how publics want and need them?

More to the point, when our students talk about 'respecting the hustle,' they're also indexing the pragmatic aspects of their lives, where hustling is not shame-inducing but a realistic assessment of their professional and economic futures. There are many diagnoses of this precarious economic and political environment, which I will not

delve into here. For my part, I want to ask what would happen if instead of our default critical stance, we started by asking, what kind of communication IS advertising, or branding or marketing?

Some readers may be aware of my own ‘shady’ past working in the ad industry. From that time, I drew two valuable lessons that have helped me think about that question. The first lesson was about how manipulative advertising really is; the second lesson is about how advertisers try to engage with their audiences.

In 1999, when *Speaking into the Air* was published, I was working as a copywriter at an advertising agency in Montreal. My experience working in advertising gave me a front-row view of what can only be called the inherent silliness of that business. Even at its best and most effective, our agency was not a shop of master manipulators. It was throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what would stick. It was dealing with clients with no imagination who wanted safe ads that looked just like those of their counterparts. The actual campaigns we produced, that people saw on TV or in magazines, were ideological in that they represented the ideological commitments of their time and place; and, of course, they reflected the capitalist system in which our society operates; but they were not conceived with an intent to control. We weren’t nearly as strategic and manipulative as critics made us out to be, as I would learn when I got to graduate school a couple of years later.

There was one thing we did consistently, if not always well, in that advertising agency. And this is the second lesson. We always tried to communicate with the audience in mind. This feature of advertising is inherent to the practice. You had to speak in a way that others would want to listen.⁶ The fact that our medium of communication at the time was a brand of lipstick or a new flavor of yogurt obviously diminished our impact. But my point is that advertising is at its core about locating the value of communication in the response of the receiver.

It was in re-reading *Speaking into the Air* that I came around to the idea that maybe the true effectiveness of promotional language is that it is very good at emulating the democratic, generous, and caring style of communication that Peters advocates for. Perhaps another reason that promotional languages are so effective is that this communication, with its idealized promises, its apparent fulfilment of desires, its

efforts to know you, is stepping in for the absence of such communication in our political, economic, and cultural spheres.

Yet most critical scholarship maintains a moral high ground toward advertising and its willing receivers. This is evidenced not only by the arguments we make against it but also by the kind of scholarship we draw upon to make those claims. There are thousands of pages of writing on advertising, branding and marketing in management journals, business magazines and bestseller lists. Most critical scholars take it as a point of pride never to read it.⁷ Instead, intellectual communication is more and more oriented toward broadcasting *our* moral stance, filling the air with sounds instead of listening to one another.

It isn't surprising, in this context, that we experience a failure to communicate. Part of the point, as I suggested earlier, is that it's very hard to critique brands without also critiquing the things people do in their name. But a second, and more consequential, issue is that critics are not speaking in order to be heard. These days, we seem to be speaking mainly in order to advertise our own capacity as truth-tellers.

Communication as Advertising

Maybe this means there are two issues we need to attend to as critical communication scholars. One is to take advertising and its relatives more seriously *as* communication, and to critique it on that basis instead of as a fetter on 'realer' or more pure forms of communication. Our determined and high-handed marginalization of advertising says a lot about the visions of communication that we still hold as ideals, and which, I think, Peters' (1999) work tries to overcome. What are these visions? That there can be a perfect, more authentic communication between self and other (which advertising mimics but in so doing debases, distracts from, or destroys); that we can be known in the deepest reaches of our souls and that advertising exploits this for the gain of another; that what really matters cannot be obtained fraudulently (by simply buying it) but must be earned; or the frankly elitist position that certain values – truth, beauty, connection – cannot be massified, or placed in the service of commercial exchange.

A second issue for critics, related to the first but perhaps more consequential, is to recognize just how much advertising has changed in recent years, as a concept, a practice, and an industry. If the problem for communication theorists in the postwar eras was to think about whether and how advertising operates as a form of social communication, the current problem for us to consider is how most social communication is now a form of advertising.

It is not just that advertising is the major engine of the internet; or that our every online activity is now collected, sorted and stored for advertising purposes; though of course that landscape is having a dramatic effect on our political and social lives. The central issue is rather that the way we relate to others has become increasingly ‘promotional,’ by which I mean self-interested, transactional, and strategic in its goals.

At one level, the transformation of social communication into advertising is a feat of technology and the market. The design and format of online platforms encourage the conflation of promotional and social messages. Take Instagram by way of example. Whether you are an individual posting pictures from a party, a photographer posting wedding photos for her clients, a professor posting an image of her graduating students, or a sponsored post for a juice company – let’s say Snapple – the format, tone, and content are indistinguishable. The intention of each Instagram post may vary in a micro-sense; but the general effect is one of promotion – of your ideas, your activities, or your self-presentation. Your audience, too, may vary in the details; but you are essentially speaking to a broad, undetermined, and changing group of receivers. This convergence is not a coincidence; it is an inbuilt feature of most media platforms today that the industry and the individual appear to communicate with the same voice, to the same audience, and with the same general intent.

At another level, the convergence of social and promotional communication is deeply political. Promotional communication has become increasingly good at not looking like promotion. Brands, for instance, are cultural objects that make use of personal values and beliefs to convey a shared intimacy and shared knowledge with their users. We know you; we hear you; we care about what you care about, is what brands seem to be saying. Brands constitute their audiences as participants in a collaborative effort to make meaning from the goods that operate under their sign. In so doing,

paradoxically, they offer the dream of communication as a meeting of minds, in the idealized, ghostly sense that *Speaking into the Air* identifies.

There is a third level at which ordinary communication is taking on promotional forms. And this takes us back to my student and her comment about the hustle. Self-promotion is now considered a necessary piece of our social and professional identities. If we think about how this takes place in university settings: Our undergraduate students are encouraged to take workshops – on campus! – to build their brands so they can broadcast coherent and curated profiles to potential employers or other institutions. University deans ask their faculty to create Twitter hashtags for campus events, use branded slide templates for conference presentations, and post pictures with students. Professors are asked to make their intellectual output more pragmatic, more digestible, and more appealing to a broader public audience (Drezner, 2017). Our images and reputations are understood to be promotional – if not directly monetizable – units for transactional exchange (Hearn, 2008).

Critics have not failed to notice this convergence of social communication and advertising. However, there remains a distinction between the communication and the advertising – as if there is a ‘realer’ or more sacred version of communication that was serious, inclusive, fairer, and more transparent, while the advertising is the strategic, self-interested, manipulative, and ultimately less authentic version. In other words, the response is still oriented along these lines: if we could peel away the strategic part of the communication, peel away the layers of manipulation (now automated via algorithms), we would find ourselves with the pure and unadulterated flows of information required for processes of democracy.

The problem with this persistent critique is that it assumes there is such a thing as pure and unadulterated communication in the first place, a fundamental or natural version of communication out there. The goal of our critique therefore is to restore that fundamental order. That way of looking at things relies on a very particular definition of communication as our baseline: a definition of communication as a meeting of minds, characterized by intimacy and disclosure, a true exchange between two souls (Peters, 1999: 8-9). John Durham Peters calls this a ‘high stakes definition’ because it is where the ‘normative pathos’ is at its strongest. In other words, we measure the impact of strategic communication in terms of its failure to live up to this high-stakes

definition of communication. So strategic communication is always bad out of the starting gate, and the job of critique then becomes to show how bad it is and in what ways it's bad.

To be clear, this is not an apologia for promotional communication at large. There are practical reasons why industries like PR and advertising have negative reputations and why we need to turn a critical eye toward them. What I am saying is that we need to be more reflexive about our approach and explicit about our benchmarks. When we separate out promotional communication as the 'bad other' to idealized definitions of communication, we can fail to recognize the ways in which *everyday* communication has come to assume a strategic or promotional character, and then exclude this from our analysis. What other definitions of communication might we draw on as a normative counterpart? And can we make this definition more explicit and more grounded, so that it isn't just about gesturing to vague notions of 'transparency' without really knowing ourselves what we mean?

This is more challenging than it seems. Our fealty to the democratic ideals of communication – respect for diverse positions, reasoned debate, and freedom of speech, among other pluralist commitments – has come to serve as a blanket of legitimacy for practices and narratives that are highly variable in their intentions. At the heart of 'alternative facts' is a commitment to finding the truth, serving the public interest, considering viewpoints from all comers... isn't it? Clearly, it is one thing to adopt an alternative framework of what communication is supposed to achieve; and quite another to pull up anchor and float unmoored in a sea of bad faith relativism in the name of critical judgement, empirical rigor, or skeptical inquiry.

I believe this is what Bruno Latour (2004) means when he invokes the contrast between matters of fact and matters of concern. As he writes,

...entire PhD programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument

of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives (227).

Rather than adhering stolidly to a fixed standard of ‘pure’ communication in the name of facts – which upon reflection appears more and more like a distant summit of moral judgment which, claiming the mantle of evaluator, we alone can reach – can we remember that the purpose of pedagogy is to meet students where they are, work from what they know, care about what they care about? To attend to matters of concern is to add to reality, not subtract from it, as Latour explains (2004: 232).

In its way, *Speaking into the Air* models this commitment. It is a subtle contribution, generous and humble: If the ultimate problem of communication is that we think we understand one another perfectly, is not its resolution the acknowledgement that we never can? And to start our conversations from that premise? We may worry about the ever-receding horizon of incommunicability that characterize our interactions; but at least we have the horizon in common.

The Problem of Advertising Critique

There is no question that as a form of communication, advertising is a language of power. But criticizing it on that basis alone sells short those of us who have been influenced, entertained, interpellated or involved in a cultural system of shared symbols – in other words, all of us. Another way to look at this is to say that critics who adopt the perspective of the distant observer unaffected by the communicative systems of the public, or mass, risk alienating themselves and their critiques from those they wish most to reach. In revealing the false coin of self-interested exchange, critics do more than call into question the realities of overconsumption or instrumentality. They reject the possibility that the things that matter to us are not all lofty or transcendent; that we can be moved by the mundane. Recognizing the staging does not have to mean that the play serves no purpose.

In the conclusion of *Speaking into the Air*, Peters recounts an experience by the philosopher William James. During a Harvard lecture on physiology, James, as the lecturer’s assistant, tends to a turtle specimen that is being projected on a screen to the

students in the lecture hall. The lecturer intends to show the pulsations of the heart; James, realizing the turtle's heart has long since given out, uses his finger to manipulate the heart, thereby achieving the desired outcome and saving the lecturer (and the turtle) from humiliation. James reflects that despite 'cheating shamelessly' to produce the desired effect, he can be forgiven in this instance, as he was 'acting for the *larger* truth' – to 'establish in the audience the true view of the subject' (Peters, 1999: 265).

Peters calls this 'the privilege of the receiver.' The ultimate purpose of communication, he argues, is not to transport unaltered an original truth from one place to another, but to engage in whatever strategic maneuvers may be required to generate understanding. The idea of conveying a perfect truth favors the speaker; but the quest for communicative understanding places the power in the hands of the audience (Peters, 1999: 266). This is for me the primary lesson of *Speaking into the Air*: that to close the gap between speaker and receiver requires not a louder truth but a different orientation. 'The other, not the self, should be the center of whatever 'communication' might mean' (1999: 265), Peters writes.

This deceptively simple claim requires a way of communicating that is more generous, and capacious, than critique normally understands itself to be. It means taking seriously others' commitments rather than trying to prove them wrong. To be clear, I do not think this means abandoning our political positions; or focusing on micro-issues instead of the systemic crises of contemporary neoliberal politics. We still want to work towards a better world, and what Peters gives us is a way to place communication at the center of this endeavor. But instead of debunking illusions, can we show how and why they matter to people (Latour, 2004)? What do they offer and what have they replaced? How might our critique attend to matters of justice instead of judgement? In this way, we might communicate in the service of transformation, rather than communicating to solidify the inherent rightness of our enterprise. It is a risky venture, and it may not work all the time, or even most of the time. But I think it is truer to the spirit of why we're in this business of communication.

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Notes

¹ This essay is dedicated to the undergraduate students in my Fall 2019 seminar, Promotional Culture, at Rutgers University. I also want to thank Devon Powers for the many conversations that have informed the perspectives in this essay.

² Jason Stanley, in his recent book on propaganda, defines advertising as 'a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, but in the service of a goal that is irrelevant to those very ideals' (Stanley, 2015: 56).

³ Decades later, political theorist Jürgen Habermas's (1991) critique of public relations would further embed the advertising-as-manipulation perspective. Habermas considers the PR man Ivy Lee a key agent of the 'refeudalization' of the public sphere. Habermas calls Lee the father of PR, the mediator of private interests in the public sphere, and the master of 'staged public opinion.' As Habermas would have it, Lee taught his industrial clients how to 'engineer' consent among different parties, which is inimical to the 'time consuming process of mutual enlightenment' required for 'a rational agreement between publicly competing opinions.' For Habermas, this correlation was a dire manifestation of the closure of the public sphere to true representation of public interests. Instead, 'privileged private interests' have 'transmuted' the traditional notion of publicity – creating an object of public interest around which 'a public of critically reflecting private people freely forms its opinion' – into the self-

management of reputation in the pursuit of political power (Habermas, 1991: 194). Habermas conflates advertising and public relations, which leads him to portray PR as uniquely about the promotion of private (mainly commercial) interests for political purposes.

⁴ Relatedly, Peters observes that ‘the lack of dialogue [in broadcasting] owes less to broadcasting technologies than to interests that profit from constituting audiences as observers rather than participants’ (Peters, 1999: 34).

⁵ Michael Schudson (1981) argues that this moralizing critique of advertising, emerging from such authors as Vance Packard and John Kenneth Galbraith, is both ‘puritanical’ and inaccurate.

⁶ In today’s hyper-fragmentation, niche-ification and specialized targeting of audiences, where multiple groups are enjoined through various frames and appeals, this principle is even more robustly applied.

⁷ In many college-level advertising departments (along with departments of marketing or business), this material is relied upon, but scholarship is rarely critical. It is by and large applied or focused on how to make advertising better or more effective or more in line with the law.

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