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"The Revolution in Communications Technology: Implications for the Public Relations Profession"

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The word "lecture" has a chilling connotation for me. It has imposing, indigestible sound. It portends footnotes and annotations - and indeed I shall be faithful to that requirement when these words reach their customary print form. But not for this platform.

The subject assigned to me by the Foundation, "The Revolution in Communications Technology: Implications for the Public Relations Profession," also has a formidable ring. Having wrestled vigorously that angle for several months, I was tempted to re-title it, paraphrasing Samuel Morse: "What Hath God and the Trustees Wrought!" - changing his punctuation of lone exclamation point to interrobang: exclamation point/question mark.

Speaking of classic quotations which have crossed my mind frequently in recent months, there is yet another, paraphrased to read: "Mr. Bell - Come here, I want you!"

His summons to Dr. Watson was only to give attention to acid burning in his trousers. Mine was an imperative for psychic help to sort through an avalanche of research and information about new telecommunications technology.

I had no doubt whatever that he would be able to do so. We shelve him neatly as the inventor of the telephone. Period. What our textbooks seldom, if ever, record is that he also invented something called the photophone - an instrument for transmitting sounds by vibrations in a beam of light. Today, that concept is one of the four key technologies of the Information Age - photonics... glass fibers, carrying information as pulses of light, generated by laser beams. The progeny of his genius - light wave technology - is already in place in countless communities. Soon it will be linking cities along the Washington-Boston corridor, carrying up to 80,000 telephone calls in strands of glass in a cable which is about the diameter of my finger.

It is indicative of the incredible pace of telecommunications technology which is telescoping time and space, doing so with astonishing efficiency, and catapulting us into the Information Age.

The other three technologies are first, microelectronics, which began with the invention by three Bell Laboratories scientists in 1947 of the transistor. Today the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of transistors works intelligently on one silicon chip.

Photographers have an irresistible urge to show it side-by-side with a fingernail or a corn flake.

Another key technology of the Information Age is digital systems - the language of one and zero with which computers talk to one another.

The transportation system is photonics - that vision of Mr. Bell more than 100 years ago.

And with these three hardware technologies comes the fourth - the software, which tells the other three what to do.

Thus endeth today's lesson in basic technologies.

I do not interpret my charge as one to gee-whiz you with the wonders of telecommunications technology. To do so would be redundant. First of all, the literature on the subject is overwhelming. It is also inescapable. It has captured the mass media, advertising, business and other specialized publications - including the *Public Relations Journal* and the *Public Relations Review*.

Most assuredly it multiplies geometrically on my desk, which - at least until 1984 - is still part of the inventory on One United Bell System. I have learned to read without undue panic about femtoseconds, kilobits, and transponders. (I promise you printed footnotes about them later. Dropped creatively into your arsenal of casual conversation, they can be priceless weapons at any gathering.)

The subject of the Information Age and telecommunications technologies has also captured the agenda of countless meetings. It was addressed at PRSA's national conference two years ago and just last year Milton Moskowitz and Chet Burger debated its social implications at the conference.

Indeed, the ubiquitous subject of the 70s - the social responsibility of business - has been replaced by the Information Age in one or more of its guises.

It's also topping the charts of the security analysts. In a survey of 567 analysts reported this year, 69% rated telecommunications as the industry with the highest growth potential for the next five years.

There is widespread infatuation today with such here-and-now applications and future visions as:

- electronic newspapers - more than 100 already have electronic systems or are putting them in place;

- the marriage of computer with the telephone, enabling people to work, shop, go to school, access libraries, bank, get a doctor's diagnosis without ever leaving home;
- assuring home security and energy use and savings by remote control;
- carrying a data display terminal in your briefcase;
- car telephones as commonplace as the one on your desk;
- communications services customized to your precise needs;
- instant opinion polling;
- computers that are user-friendly, speaking our language instead of insisting that we speak theirs.

Or to move into the Twilight Zone of perhaps:

- direct communication with animals;
- man/machine symbiosis - linking the mind with the computer for instant learning or storing the knowledge of one individual in a computer to pass along to another.

The possibilities transcend imagination. It is no wonder that Philip Meyer, futurist at the University of North Carolina, wryly commented, "Maybe our legs will wither and heads will grow like the genius-villains in old sci-fi comics!"

The changes for our society are almost as fundamental as that. Message movement is replacing people movement. At Tuesday's mini-plenary session, we'll be hearing a report of the Delphi Study sponsored by PRSA. Among the trends reported, we'll hear reactions of leaders in our business to the new communications technologies.

Is the public-at-large accepting them? When the price is right, the embrace is instant. The younger generation is mainlining computers. Research tracking public attitudes last year reported faith in technology in creating jobs, benefits, and solutions. But there's an equal - 50/50 - concern out there about technology creating an inhuman world.

(My faith in the infinite ability of people to adapt and to accept change was reaffirmed last year when mail mobiles were introduced in our company headquarters. These are carts which follow an invisible magnetic line and R2D2 their way around the floor delivering mail. After a brief standoff, they acquired names such as Bell's Fargo, Emily Postal, Cora Spondence, Phony Express and Norman Mailer.)

Consider that we are in the midst of massive change from an industrial society to an information-based society. Fifty percent of our work force is now in the business of the collection and dissemination of information. Raj Reddy of Carnegie Mellon predicts that in 30 years only three million people will be employed in manufacturing. By the end of this year, the number of computers - large and small - will exceed the world's population.

Management guru Peter Drucker has declared, "Knowledge, during the last few decades, has become the central capital... and the crucial resource of the economy...Knowledge has actually become the primary industry."

John LeGates, of Harvard, says, "The Information Age is the substitution of information for our other basic resources such as energy, materials, capital and labor."

That's economic revolution.

But it goes beyond the economy alone.

The Information Age - and the technological explosion which is powering it - is literally changing the nature of the human environment.

That's social revolution.

Ian Ross, president of Bell Laboratories, has asserted, "The Industrial Revolution extended our muscles. The Communications Revolution will extend our minds."

In his recent book on the subject, Frederick Williams, professor of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Southern California, reached further in writing, "The electronic environment is instantaneously changeable. It can directly link more human minds, minds with ideas, and minds with machines than any communications means we have developed in our 36,000 year spoken or 6,000 year written heritage. It is permeating, energizing, stultifying, mesmerizing, trivializing, delighting and dulling.... We create it and we can control it."

Coming back to earth and this room with me: what does all this portend for the public relations professional?

Let's consider a few of the answers.

First, it portends changes in our daily work habits. For many of us, these changes are already in process.

- We use computer terminals to write, edit, send messages, access information. There are even computer programs which presumably improve writing styles.
- We have such data banks and libraries as Nexis, Dow Jones, and the New York Times literally at the reach and tips of our fingers.
- We can hold staff meetings, confer with clients, conduct nationwide briefings and press events via teleconferencing.
- We'll be using electronic mail and programming our calendars by computer.

We can - increasingly - employ communications technology to manage the hardware of our business faster, better, more efficiently, more effectively.

(These are portents, too, for the young-and-future professionals, who must be educated to use these new technologies.)

Second. There will be new opportunities for the professional agenda of public relations people. Among them:

- Improvements in our research capabilities. We're already seeing how new technologies can be applied to issues scanning. We'll extend that to turnaround research to narrow the frustrating gap between surveys and results, which has so often distorted our planning in the past.
- New media for our messages. Electronic media to reach employees at their work locations: Satellites. Cable. Home video playbacks. (In my company today, we're offering company video programs to managers who use 1/2" tapes for home viewing. We now have more than 100 on our distribution list - a modest 1% among the management group, but we know that trajectory is straight up in the near future. The special dividends are viewing time at home instead of work, and the sharing of company messages with families.)
- The ability to customize messages to specific audiences. That's textbook axiom in public relations, of course. But the potential now is to bypass traditional media and literally reach precise audiences - share owners, customers, and specific publics - with messages exactly tailored to their interests, their incomes, all the demographic factors vital to your strategy. The critical difference will be that the individual will gain control over the selection of the information you transmit and its time of delivery.
- Improved opportunities for the measurement of the effectiveness of our work.
- One giant potential for an entirely new area of public relations attention: getting employees to accept new technology. The electronic office will inevitably meet resistance. It's a radical change in work habits. Its introduction, its acceptance (Drucker calls it "attitude training competence of people") - those are new objectives which public relations people can address for their organizations and their clients.

We are a very creative, very resourceful breed. We will capture the new communications technologies and make them our own. They are a candy store for us - exciting, rewarding, with promise to help improve our craft, expand our effectiveness and influence.

But while the sugar plums dance merrily in our heads, I implore you to look with me for a moment beyond the tempting counter, beyond the carpentry of our craft. And here I seek to tread on sacred water, with all the obvious risk and presumption that infers.

But risk among good colleagues is well worth taking. Stay with me these few moments while I reflect on some larger concerns. (They are thoughts, in fact, which began to surface in dialogues with students. They have a way of making one reflect and think. I commend that encounter to you.)

With you, I trace my heritage in this profession to founding fathers - to Alexander Hamilton and his Federalist Papers, to Jefferson and Sam Adams - consummate practitioners of the art of persuasion and public relations. I take perverse joy in knowing that many of them stood by anxiously one night, hovering over a printer's shoulder as he produced the declarative document for this nation.

And so, I am concerned about some of the implications of the Information Age for our unique and sometimes fragile society.

I am concerned about the potential for instant feedback which may threaten time to nurture the American genius for compromise and consensus.

I am concerned about the changes which could result when opportunities for human encounter - in the marketplace, in the workplace- are diminished or altered. Does a move back to cottage industries in an electronic era bode ill or well for us? It's estimated that by the mid-nineties more than 10 million people will be working from their homes. Will we need new institutions to provide human contact and avoid isolation?

I am concerned about the possibility of the information poor/information rich classes of society. If information is the most valued commodity of the future, will a concentration of that power dangerously rupture our national stability?

I am concerned about privacy in an environment where machines are corruptible. (That has an Orwellian sound to it!) As one observer recently commented: "Information users must be advocates of the free and orderly flow of truthful information." Does this echo the PRSA Code? Should our Code be re-examined to take into account new technologies, new media?

I am concerned about the impact on language and writing skills which will be the likely tradeoffs to the necessity of becoming computer-literate. In a recent conversation with Yen Phillips, vice president of telecommunications policy and planning at Citicorp - an unusual combination of psychologist and physicist - he points out that language and writing are key to the way we solve problems and computer literacy could alter that process dramatically. I am concerned about overload in an information-intensive society. The critical question is not one of quantity so much as it is of handling information efficiently and well. Who sets priorities? Alvin Toffler has also pointed out, "There comes a time when choice, rather than freeing the individual, becomes so complex, difficult and costly that it turns into the opposite. There comes a time, in short, when choice turns into over choice and freedom into unfreedom."

Is Toffler right about the tyranny of too much choice, too much information?

The operative word in this litany is "concern" - not doomsday prophecy, but a caring apprehension. My concern is to have these subjects addressed, the alternatives inventoried to avoid these risks and others.

Emily Coleman, of AT&T Corporate Planning, summed it up in blunt fashion: "No one is really doing it yet. The futurist positions are polarized on the subject. Either everything is going to hell in a hand basket or everything will be resolved by technology."

Someplace between those two poles lies a middle ground for thoughtful, objective, pragmatic examination.

Who takes that initiative?

Do these concerns and that initiative have implications for the public relations profession?

Yesterday, the Assembly of this Society adopted a statement about the nature of public relations. Its preamble states: "Public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions."

If we accept and believe that, then in an environment which is changing radically, in which no institution will remain untouched, in which some may be replaced, is this not an initiative which we - this professional society - this Foundation - can be responsible for?

How does one begin so awesome a task? In my philosophy, one simply begins. Now.

One could, for example, under the aegis of the Foundation, bring together a symposium of interested, knowledgeable people from the disciplines of public relations and the social sciences to begin to study the impacts and implications for new communications technologies - the Information Age - on the future of American society. The positive objective would be to minimize human dislocations in the progress toward a changing social environment, a new order. On a mega-scale, it's issue identification - the management of change.

I am convinced that such a forum and a sharing of its results would help to generate the national dialogue so urgently needed. And surely dialogue is our business and our genius!

It is customary that the honor of this annual Foundation lecture is accompanied by a grant of a thousand dollars. A few years ago, a predecessor to this platform, Allen Center, returned that stipend to the Foundation to underwrite a special program.

Today, I follow his example. The grant for the privilege of this platform will be returned to the Foundation as initial funding to sponsor a symposium on the social impacts of the Information Age. The contribution will, I trust, be a seed nurtured by others.

My action is spurred by two fundamental, passionate convictions:

First, while the Information Age and its new technologies will radically change our society, our work habits, our individual lives, it can most assuredly improve the value and quality of human life in this republic beyond our line of vision and imagination.

The second conviction I hold with equal passion: the public relations profession is uniquely qualified to be a catalyst, a steward, an architect in that enterprise and magnificent destiny. I ask and challenge you, my colleagues: Who else, if not we?