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"The Social, Economic and Political Context
for the Practice of Public Relations"

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I have been asked to comment today on three issues: what changes are occurring socially, economically, politically, and technologically; what impact these changes are having on our private and public institutions; and, finally, what implications these impacts have for public relations professionals operating in a democratic society.

What I would like you to consider by way of response to these issues are the following propositions:

> First: at the most fundamental level, very little has changed socially, economically, and politically since time immemorial, nor is it likely to change substantially in the future;

> Second: what changes we do observe in our social, economic, and political institutions are largely the result of technological developments and the interplay of technology on fundamental sociological, economic, and political forces;

> Third: what modern society perceives as a radically changing social, economic, and political environment is not so much the result of radical changes in those forces, but rather the result of a revolution in communications technology; a primary impact of the communications revolution has been to destabilize social, economic, and political forces both here and abroad, and create mismatches between what we might call old and new states;

> Finally: for the next decade and beyond, our history will be explained as a quest to restore social, economic, and political equilibrium; and, in that quest, the communications revolution will play as great a role in resolving the problem as it did in creating it. Whether history will judge that role kindly or critically is in some small way in the hands of public relations professionals assembled here in our nation's Capital this week.

I would now like to explore each of these four propositions in somewhat greater depth and demonstrate their relationship to one another.

The Social, Economic and Political Context for the Practice of Public Relations, Carl S. Sloane
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1. Little Has Changed or Will Change Socially, Economically, and Politically

The social, economic, and political history of mankind is best explained, I believe, as a continuous and immutable drive by individuals to satisfy their fundamental needs for physical safety, food, and shelter, and, once satisfied at the most basic level, to improve on and control the conditions of their physical environment. The thought, as anyone who has taken Psychology 101 will recognize, is not original with me, and there are a variety of more elaborate models to explain what is essentially the same phenomenon.

The manner in which we have come to organize our private and public social, economic, and political institutions is, I would suggest, ultimately a reflection of this fundamental human drive. That is, individuals have grouped themselves into social, economic, or political units and subjugated their individuality to higher authority whenever they had reason to believe that their needs could be more fully, quickly, or assuredly satisfied through some form of collective action.

Much of mankind's progress can be explained in terms of this fundamental paradigm, and it is no less applicable to 20th Century society than it was at the dawning of mankind. As one searches, for example, to understand broad patterns of decision making in late 20th Century governmental or corporate institutions, do not look to modern financial theory as an explanatory variable, but rather to the desire of people in positions of decision making authority to preserve or enhance their personal interests; and most notable among these interests is the matter of safety, food, and shelter, or what we today term "lifestyle."

Man's drive for an improved lifestyle not only explains much of human progress, but also most of human strife. Where one segment of society possessed a demonstrably higher standard of living than another--a superior means of satisfying its needs or a superior means of hoarding a limited supply of the means for satisfying such needs--conflict invariably ensued, although a variety of more or less elaborate artifices were devised over time to either mask lifestyle disparities and forestall or moderate conflicts. The Berlin Wall, government control of communications media, Moslem Fundamentalism, and even collective bargaining and affirmative action legislation are all modern expressions of efforts either to obfuscate or moderate disparities between societies and political economies.

2. The Interplay of Technology and Social, Economic, and Political Forces

Within the context of universal drives for improved lifestyles, technological development has been the engine of change. Discovery of the means for cultivating food and feed grains transformed a nomadic hunting society to an agrarian one, establishing settlements and towns and laying the groundwork for modern nation-states. Ten thousand years later, a series of technological developments, beginning with the printing press and extending to the steam engine, made possible the mass production and consumption of manufactured goods, transforming society from agrarian to industrial, and from rural to urban.

The Social, Economic and Political Context for the Practice of Public Relations, Carl S. Sloane
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Each of these technologically driven revolutions in our societal, economic, and political institutions has its own modern idiom in what some have termed the post-industrial revolution, the transformation of an industrially based society to a knowledge- or information-based society.

Let us examine just a few important examples. In the social realm, we see a variety of technologically induced changes, the longer-term significance of which we have yet to either fully appreciate or fathom. First is "the pill," a simple, cost-effective and readily available birth control device that has changed gender roles and life experiences in ways that affect values, attitudes, and behavior of women _and_ men. Second, are advances in medical technology--antibiotics, vaccines, medical imaging, and surgical techniques--which have extended average life spans beyond previously unimagined limits and, in so doing, created an explosion in the elderly segment of our population whose special needs modern society is uniquely ill-equipped to respond to.

In the economic arena, or what we might think of as social-economy, there are comparable examples of technologically induced change. Among such changes, the first I would cite are technological developments in herbicides, pesticides, and genetically engineered seeds. As a result of the so-called Green Revolution, we have for the first time in history the ability to feed the world's population. We have, in fact, succeeded to the point of creating agricultural surplus on a world scale and, in so doing, reversed the United States agricultural trade balance, and created a socio-economic dilemma of substantial proportions for American, European and Japanese farmers alike. Lagging just slightly behind agricultural surplus in point of time is industrial surplus created by advances in manufacturing technology. As a result of the presence and potentiality of automation, robotization, and computer control technology, society faces a prospect of structural unemployment over the next quarter and half century of substantial proportions. Combined with agricultural and industrial advances are a series of technological developments encompassing telecommunications, electronic data processing, and transportation that have combined in one generation to make our domestic economy and those of other nations subservient to a global economy. In this context, one must think not merely in terms of developments that facilitate imports and exports (although these are very important), but also of advances that enhance flows of capital and technology.

Moving on to the political arena, or what we might call the political-economy, I would again point to advances in computers and telecommunications, along with nuclear armaments, inertial guidance systems and missile technology as causally central to current and foreseeable U.S. trade and budget deficits, two of the more pressing issues we face as a nation. Consider the following, admittedly oversimplified perspective on the role played by technology in the major political, economic and social issues of the day:

> As the partial result of technological developments in nuclear armaments and ballistic missiles, we enter into a military competition with the Soviet Union stimulating massive U.S. defense spending. To conduct this competition while avoiding domestic economic and social crisis, the U.S. government incurs massive budget deficits. U.S. budget deficits, in turn, are financed in significant measure by our borrowing capital abroad, the magnitude and timing of which would have

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www.instituteforpr.org

been impossible without modern computer and telecommunications technology. Foreign lenders are only too happy to oblige because U.S. domestic prosperity and tranquility allow foreign manufacturers to sell goods into the U.S. market, thereby avoiding political and social crisis in their own rather depressed domestic economies.

3. The Unique Role of Advanced Communications Technology in a Changing World and Resultant Destabilizing Effects

What I would like to suggest to you now is that what many see as a fundamental discontinuity of past and current social, economic, and political forces is not discontinuity at all. Rather, it is a continuity of man's efforts to improve his lifestyle with technology entering the picture to alter the means by which such ends are achieved individually and collectively through private and public institutions organized primarily for that purpose.

What differences do exist between the past and the present are largely the result of discontinuity in experience and perception--discrepancies brought about by the introduction of advanced communications technology--and I include under the broad heading of advanced communications technology all modern means by which man acquires knowledge of his environment: radio, telephone, television, computer-based information systems, print media, and jet-age air transportation. Technological advances in each of these and other modes of communication have brought relatively low-cost, highly accurate, and nearly instantaneous global communications within the practical grasp of virtually every community in the world. As a result, information that formerly took centuries, years, or months to convey, now takes weeks, days, hours, or even seconds. Information that previously was vague, dull, and incomplete is now clear, abundant, and powerfully presented in full motion and color. And, most importantly, virtually everyone in the world has access to it.

What has this meant to modern society and what changes is it inducing? First, modern communications technology has, in just a few short years, made a reality of Marshall McLuhan's "global village" and, in so doing, introduced a level of complexity in cross-cultural social, economic, and political interactions and interdependencies that as yet are difficult to even appreciate, so much as understand and respond to effectively. Protectionist trade legislation, efforts to interdict illicit drugs at our borders or halt their cultivation overseas, summit conferences, international coordination of interest rates and currency exchange values, new legislation to control immigration--all represent means to come to grips with these new and complex realities. The fact that they all represent old remedies for new problems frustrates many of us. The fact that we are unable to devise different responses only serves to underscore the novelty of the "global village" and the type of discontinuity of experience it presents us with.

Second, modern communications technology has illustrated in stark reality for all peoples, here in the U.S. and around the world, the disparity of conditions under which they live; has greatly heightened peoples' expectations for a better life, soon; and has

The Social, Economic and Political Context for the Practice of Public Relations, Carl S. Sloane
Institute for Public Relations
www.instituteforpr.org

made it increasingly difficult for governments and other institutions of central authority to cloak such disparities in a veil of secrecy, ignorance, or ideology. Unrest in the Middle East; strife in South Africa; export drives in Brazil and elsewhere; the new capitalism of China; stresses within Russian society; urban violence in America; the women's liberation movement; and, yes, even the emergence of Yuppies all bear witness to the universal drive for a better life, irrespective of one's current circumstances.

Lastly, modern communications has greatly enhanced both the speed and the magnitude of technology transfer between communities of interest. Whereas the pace and volume of technological change and its consequent requirements for social, economic and political change previously was selective in its impact and provided society with a cushion of decades or even centuries for absorption and adaptation, today's society is faced with the challenge of abrupt and comprehensive change. Take, for example, competitive economic advantages achieved by companies and countries through the invention, development, and deployment of new technologies. In the immediate post World War II era it was not unusual to talk in terms of competitive lead times of five years' duration. In the 1960s and 1970s, competitive lead times were reduced to two years and then to one year. Today, it is commonplace for business executives to talk in terms of six months' lead time, and before long, I trust, we will talk of six weeks, six days, and then six minutes.

4. Implications for Public Relations Professionals

As a consequence of such rapid and pervasive technological change, I believe we have entered into what in all probability will be a prolonged period of instability, characterized as a mismatch between old states; old values, systems, and behaviors; and for new but as yet ill-defined values, systems, behaviors. Common to such periods of instability are:

> Intense competition between parties who perceive a momentary opportunity to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage over others, be they segments of society, businesses, or governments;

> The splintering of society into special interest groups acting either to defend their established positions, values, beliefs, and systems or to promote fresh values, systems, and the like which are held to be more congruent with the new state of affairs;

> Concerted efforts by some to halt and then roll back the technological developments that brought about destabilization in the first instance; and

> Profound frustration on the part of individuals, groups, and even nations who perceive themselves as relative losers in the new order, often resulting in desperate and violent response.

What does this socio-political dynamic portend for public relations professionals? Among other things it means that:

The Social, Economic and Political Context for the Practice of Public Relations, Carl S. Sloane
Institute for Public Relations
www.instituteforpr.org

Issues are going to come at you in rapid-fire fashion;

They are going to come from non-traditional sources: segments of society, cultures, countries, and competitors that you are unfamiliar with and did not previously count among your recognized constituencies or competition; and

The issues themselves are going to be more novel and complex than those you have previously encountered.

In sum, your job is not going to get easier; no matter how successful you have been in the past, you are going to have to get even better.

Where and how must you get better? I would suggest five points that you may wish to ponder and discuss in your deliberations and workshops over the next few days.

1.   To be effective, to add value, and to excel in your profession, you will have to get deeper into the substance of issues; you will have to be truly knowledgeable in an expanded range of issues; and you will have to possess sufficient insight to see through the complexities of issues. Form will become an increasingly feeble substitute in the fast-changing, complex environment of tomorrow.

2.   You will have to take a longer range view of issues than was previously warranted and have a much clearer and broader sense of longer term goals and positioning. Otherwise, you will find yourselves operating in a purely reactive mode, entangled in a web of inconsistencies and perceived as narrowly focused and of dubious ethics. And, given the speed, power and ubiquity of modern communications technology, extracting yourself from such a web will become increasingly difficult.

3.   Because mismatches between old and new states invariably produce high degrees of uncertainty and perceived risk, to succeed you will have to excel at explaining, ameliorating, guiding and educating--practices that stand in stark contrast to obfuscating, stonewalling, manipulating, and misinforming.

4.   Because your publics are likely to view issues in absolute rather than relative terms, you will have to devise innovative risk communications programs that help people to truly understand and willingly confront the inherent trade-offs that society faces. And, because interests will conflict, meaningful and timely resolution of issues will hang on your ability to achieve a high level of public involvement and trust.

5.   Lastly, you will have to resolve, in ways that are meaningful, lasting, and intensely personal, the relative merits of controlled versus freely flowing information. Today, more than ever before, we have the technical means to centrally control information flows. What's more, with a perceived need to redress the societal problems that ensue from the mismatch of old and new states, we have a ready-made set of pressures to exercise authority over the timely dispersion of accurate information.

The Social, Economic and Political Context for the Practice of Public Relations, Carl S. Sloane
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Borrowing on the previously discussed paradigm of self-interest, it is altogether likely that many of you will identify your personal well being and interest as being tied to the control or artful management of information. In view of the central theme of this meeting and its location in our nation's Capital, it strikes me as worthwhile to address a special appeal to those of you who understand that self-interest encompasses tomorrow as well as today. I encourage you to vigorously defend rights of free speech; to take personally your obligations in a free society to ensure abundant flows of accurate and timely information; and to actively combat all efforts, witting and unwitting, that may lead to excessive concentration of, or central-control over, the media of mass communications. So long as information is flowing freely, free societies will be well served; old and new states will be brought into congruence sooner and with less conflict. Even if it is information people do not particularly like to hear, at the very least a dialogue will be taking place.

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