

THE NEWS SHAPERS: STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AS A THIRD FORCE IN NEWSMAKING

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Editor's Note

Efforts to manipulate news media coverage often are highly successful because astute public relations practitioners know how to produce audience-pleasing news stories that are well attuned to the media's needs. Journalists find it difficult to reject them, especially when they are offered free of charge to cost-conscious enterprises. Much of the news reaching the public has therefore become a manufactured product, concocted by political strategists who strive to shape public opinion by controlling the public's news supply.

In chapter 35, Manheim describes the tactics through which news shapers usurp the mission of a free press. These mostly unseen elites manage to create the political reality that the public experiences, all the while perpetuating the myth that the news reflects journalists' perceptions of important political happenings. In essence, the press has abandoned its journalistic standards by yielding its power to freely select, frame, and feature news for publication to large, unseen, self-serving elites. As the idiom puts it, it is selling its soul for a mess of pottage.

At the time of writing Jarol B. Manheim was a professor of media and public affairs and political science at George Washington University. He was the founding director of its famed School of Media and Public Affairs. Manheim had written extensively about the profound political influence that private-sector interest groups enjoy in the public domain thanks to their massive strategic communication campaigns that allow them to dominate the thrust of the news.

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. . . [T]he assumed natural occurrence of news is closest to the heart of journalism's mythology, for the only reality that can exist under the myth of objectivity is the one true reality that can be observed.

Journalism's dependence on the observation of this one true naturally occurring reality—shaped by the individual and institutional norms of the profession—has left journalists, and the public that depends upon them for its understanding of political reality, susceptible to manipulation. The reason is that news is not necessarily a naturally occurring phenomenon; rather, some news is purposefully formulated and shaped with skill and effectiveness to take advantage of the needs and interests of reporters and news organizations, even as they serve the interests of other parties altogether. It is not the reporters or the news organizations that do the shaping. It is the news sources themselves, or more correctly, the strategic advisers whose recommendations guide and form their public actions. These strategic communicators . . . strive systematically to ensure, insofar as is possible, that the work product of journalism reflects events and an environment, and creates a reality, which they, not the journalists, define. Their purpose is not to question or undermine the credibility or esteem that our society attaches to journalism. To the contrary, their purpose is to capture and exploit it for their own benefit.

That newsmakers should have an interest in influencing stories relating to them or their interests is hardly a new idea. What is new is the sophistication with which they are now able to affect the news, the considerable and growing extent of their success, and the expanding body of newsmaker types who are employing such methods. The breadth and depth of this trend—and, as a result, the gap between the myth and the reality of news—are now sufficient to constitute a genuine threat to the viability of journalism as we have come to know it. Table 35-1 summarizes some dimensions of the myth-reality gap. . . .

Table 35-1 Journalism: Myth and reality

The myth	The reality
News occurs naturally.	News is manufactured.
News is a form of inquiry and explication.	News is a form of storytelling.
News organizations seek to find and expose the truth.	News organizations seek to maximize profits.
Journalists are independent-thinking professionals.	Journalists are bureaucrats whose job is to fill time or space in a cost-effective, audience-pleasing manner.
Journalists are deep-earth miners who will move mountains to find the truth.	Journalists are hunter-gatherers who skim the surface for the most readily available material.
News content is a product of objective observation.	News content is a product of manipulation.

Strategy and Tactics

In fact, the development of a social technology of influence has been well and widely documented.¹ Its adoption in the form of "strategic political communication" is quite advanced.² Elsewhere, I have defined this form of communication as "the use of sophisticated knowledge of such attributes of human behavior as attitude and preference structures, cultural tendencies, and media use patterns—and such relevant organizational behaviors as how news organizations make decisions regarding news content and how congressional committees schedule and structure hearings—to shape and target messages so as to maximize their desired impact while minimizing undesired collateral effects."³ It is, in sum, an applied science of persuasive political communication. Among the common elements of this science are the identification of stakeholders and their respective interests and points of susceptibility to influence, the creation of positions, the forging of alliances, and the definition and promulgation of a persuasive and goal-supporting political reality.

Identifying Stakeholders

Every political institution and every political issue is associated with a set of stakeholders—individuals, groups, or organizations with some interest in its advancement. Typically, the principal stakeholders of a policy or agency are the beneficiaries of its implementation or actions or those whose positions could be put at risk through the same. For example, the stakeholders in health care policy would include health care providers, health care workers, insurers, employers who offer health care benefits to their workers, the public, and various levels of governments. Stakeholders in the Environmental Protection Agency would include the regulated industries, private contractors who work on EPA projects, and environmental interest groups, among others. Each of these stakeholders has a set of interests, and each has ways in which it is susceptible to influence. The strategic communicator typically initiates a persuasive effort by inventorying the range of stakeholders involved in a particular policy or agency, specifying insofar as possible the nature of their respective interests, delineating their respective susceptibilities to influence, and identifying those points around which some form of common interest or alliance might be established that could bring about the desired objective. The idea is not to get any stakeholder to act against its own interests, but to cause it to act selectively in its own interest in ways that help advance the goals of the communicator.

Building Positions

With this cluster of targets in mind, the strategic communicator next begins to develop, test, refine, and roll out issue positions in such a way that two

objectives are achieved. First, the positions must serve—either explicitly or indirectly—the communicator's underlying goals. Second, the positions must be framed so as to maximize the chances of building a sufficiently powerful alliance to make their achievement likely. There are many ways to build such positions, ranging from selecting particular aspects of a given issue to highlight or obscure, to choosing specific language and visual images through which to portray them. Typically, when making these choices, strategists employ social science research—surveys, focus groups, content analysis, and even physiological experimentation—to evaluate specific formulations with representative audiences.⁴ Then, as selections are made and implemented, they are tested through further research until the optimal strategy becomes clear.

Building Alliances

Having identified the relevant stakeholders and designed and tested the themes to be used to influence them, the communication strategist builds political alliances. Alliance building can have several purposes. The most obvious is to enhance the likelihood of obtaining the desired outcome. But other, less obvious, purposes can be at least as important. For example, a group that knows itself to be politically unpopular can, through strategic communication, generate an alliance of other groups without itself joining or even being identified with that alliance. It thereby stands to benefit, not merely from the achievements of the alliance it has fostered, but from the greater popularity of the participants.

Defining Realities

With a message and an alliance in place or in prospect, the communication strategist next sets out to exercise political influence—to advance the substantive cause. This is the point at which the greatest incentive exists to manage—manipulate—news outcomes.

For any individual or group or institution, reality is a social construct.⁵ It is the product of (1) judgments made about the meaning of (2) the information that is available at any given time. The judgments themselves are driven by many well-entrenched internal dynamics—psychological, sociological, and other factors. The judgments are generally not highly susceptible to influence, but the same cannot be said of the flow of information upon which these judgments are to be based. In greater or lesser measure, that flow can be conditioned through political action in ways that will bend perceptions of reality in one direction or another. In politics and public policy, even in the age of blogs, Blackberries, and instant messaging, the principal form in which information flows is as news. Therefore, through effective management of the news, “reality” can be shaped and influence achieved.

News management can take many forms. Knowing, for example, the predilection of editors for particular types of stories, such as those with distinct elements of human pathos, communication strategists can literally create stories of those types, then bring them to the attention of editors. Similarly, knowing the preference of television editors, in particular, for stories that incorporate graphic video imagery, stories can be crafted to incorporate such imagery, then “shopped” to those most likely to pursue them. Knowing that reporters like to document their stories with quotations from authorities, strategists can provide to those reporters lists of authorities whom they know (but the reporter may not) will support their view, or they can even deliver the quotations themselves. Knowing that the media gravitate toward simple language and visual imagery to represent complex stories, communication strategists can devise a verbal and visual lexicon that at once meets the journalists' needs and benefits their own positions. Through these and many other devices, news can be—is—managed with some effect.⁶

The Players: Who Would Do Such a Thing?

Such behaviors might seem to lie beyond the pale in the context of a normative discussion of democratic practice, but they are, in fact, commonplace. Their existence is an empirical fact. Strategic communication is employed by an astonishingly wide range of players in the U.S. political system, and its use continues to grow.

Political Parties and Candidates

Not surprisingly, the techniques of influence I have described were first developed in the electoral arena, where today they are not only assumed to operate, but are actually afforded some measure of legitimacy. After all, people expect their politicians to attempt to influence them, and are not surprised when others . . . try to sway their votes. . . . Though perhaps the most prolific, these electoral efforts at persuasion are in many ways the least interesting and the least significant in the political system for the simple reason that they are widely recognized, a factor that automatically minimizes their effectiveness. Strategic communication is most effective when it is least visible, and least effective when it is revealed.⁷

Policy Interests in Nonelectoral Settings

By 1981, when Ronald Reagan became president, strategic communication was a fully integrated component of the policy-making process. Reagan's advisers knew that the centerpiece of his legislative agenda, a massive tax cut, would be dead-on-arrival in the Democratic Congress, so they set out to resuscitate it through an orchestrated campaign of grassroots organizing, coalition building, issue framing, and media managing. By the time they

d finished, they had not only made adoption of a relatively radical policy inevitable, but they had also demonstrated for all to see the potency of strategic communication.⁸ In the major public policy battles that followed—perhaps most notably in the battle over health care policy in the first Clinton administration and in the contest to shape public understanding of the U.S. role in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein—communication strategists have been employed by industry, interest groups, and others to create and generate support for versions of reality supporting their respective goals.

Foreign Governments

One area where journalists and news organizations are especially susceptible to manipulation is foreign policy making. With the exception of the occasional high profile crisis or conflict, and even in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks, the American public has relatively little knowledge of, or interest in, foreign affairs and makes few demands on the news media for extensive and informed coverage. . . . The combination of low interest and limited information translates into news organizations and citizens being vulnerable to manipulation. Over the years a number of governments have worked to exploit that vulnerability. One study has shown that by the mid-1980s more than five hundred foreign governments, political entities, and companies had hired American “agents” to assist them in the United States, and that number was growing. Many of these “agents” monitored and shaped media coverage expressly to influence U.S. foreign policy.⁹

Corporations

Corporations expend vast amounts of money every year for the purpose of shaping their images. The most obvious elements of this effort include advertising and public relations. . . .

The mechanics of marketing or other corporate activities often take forms similar to those characterized here as strategic political communication, especially with respect to a company’s efforts to manage its portrayal in the news, which can affect everything from its stock price to its ability to attract customers. It is only natural, then, that when a corporation sees that a political interest is at stake, it employs the same methods of influence in that arena as it does elsewhere. . . .

Labor Unions

For labor unions, particularly since the mid-1990s, strategic communication has supplanted the strike as a weapon of choice in dealing with the managements of unionized companies and has played a primary role in efforts to organize workers at nonunion companies. The unions use

“corporate campaigns,” which are primarily strategic communication campaigns—generally negative in character—that are designed to attack the reputation and essential stakeholder relationships of a company to pressure management to accede to a union demand. These campaigns incorporate all of the principal elements identified earlier—stakeholder identification, message development and targeting, image framing, and media manipulation. The unions have become sophisticated practitioners of this approach, which they have directed at a growing number of companies.¹⁰ In 1995, when John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO, then the nation’s premier labor federation, he publicly committed the federation to increased corporate campaign activity and pledged tens of millions of dollars to the effort.¹¹ . . .

Social Interests

The core elements of corporate campaigns were first identified, not by the labor movement, but by New Left political activists in the 1960s. These activists, and their successors who now constitute the contemporary Progressive Left, did not lead in the full-scale development of this form of activism. But they have rediscovered it, particularly as an element of the environmental, human rights, and similar social movements. The result is a growing number of campaigns, primarily directed against corporations, but also against governments, that seek to mobilize stakeholders as a force for change. One of the most interesting and potentially far-reaching of these efforts is the social responsibility investment movement, which, in concert with union and public employee pension funds and other allies, has been working to leverage the influence of institutional shareholders (banks, pension funds, mutual funds, insurance companies, and the like, which hold millions of shares in publicly traded companies) to change corporate governance structures and social policies.¹²

Litigants

“Litigation journalism”—the systematic manipulation of the media by parties to a lawsuit—is another application of these techniques that came of age in the 1980s.¹³ The objective of litigation journalism is to shape public opinion, either at large or among a specified pool of prospective jurors, in such a way that one side in a trial or the other defines the reality of the case. For example, it was only in the context of a civil trial alleging harm from the use of a cellular telephone that the public “learned” that the use of cell phones may be associated with an increased incidence of certain brain cancers.¹⁴ There is some reason to doubt that association, but the fact that it entered the public discourse as an assertion of fact at a critical time in the litigation framed the trial in a whole new way.¹⁵ In a similar way, it is now commonplace for

corporations, other organizations, and even individual litigants to engage in media framing when they are involved in major litigation.

Outcomes

The presence of so many players in the game of strategic political communication seems to suggest pluralism at work. After all, if corporations and unions, governments and social activists, litigants and others are all playing the same game, is it not likely that a reasonable balance of some sort will emerge? That is the obvious question, but it misses the point.

To begin with, the ability of so many different kinds of political interests to manipulate the communication system to their respective advantage hardly constitutes a ringing endorsement of the system itself. To the contrary, it suggests that the information being distributed through news organizations and other channels is, in some broadly systemic sense, not what it appears. Moreover, because the information in question has, as a central feature of the strategic communication process, been systematically reduced to its lowest common denominator of audience appeal, the apparent quality of the information provided by the aforementioned political actors and through the news media is a mere façade.¹⁶ In point of fact, much of that information has been stripped of its substantive content and packaged in verbal and visual symbols.

Added to that is an essential fact of strategic communication: negatives trump positives. For a variety of reasons ranging from their inherent appeal to journalists to their prurient appeal to the public and their memorability, negative messages carry more weight than positive messages, and those on the attack generally have the advantage over those on the defensive. Therefore, the labor union attacking a company's reputation in a corporate campaign holds the advantage, as does the litigant making broad damage claims against another, and so forth. The likely consequences of this rising tide of negativism are greater public cynicism and less public confidence in social institutions. Both trends can be observed in the United States today.

Finally, the pluralist presumption of offsetting interests carries an implicit assumption that all of the interests in question—or some set of relevant competing clusters or alliance structures—share equally in the skills, experience, and resources that can be brought to the contest. When one considers the range of players now employing these techniques, the pairs in which they might compete, and the constraints under which they operate, that assumption is not on its face valid.

For the society subjected to the substantial and growing degree of this strategizing and implementing, the net outcome is a diminution of the quality of political dialogue in direct proportion to the degree and effectiveness of

the manipulation that occurs. To the extent that political dialogue guides and limits policy making and other political behaviors, and that such guides and limitations preserve the values of the society, the political life of that society is impaired. . . .

Notes

1. Gary Mauser, *Political Marketing: An Approach to Campaign Strategy* (New York: Praeger, 1983); Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy, *The Phenomenon of Political Marketing* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990); and Philippe J. Maarek, *Political Marketing and Communication* (London: John Libbey, 1995).
2. Jarol B. Manheim, *All of the People, All the Time: Strategic Communication in American Politics* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1991); and W. Lance Bennett and Jarol B. Manheim, "The Big Spin: Strategic Communication and the Transformation of Pluralism Democracy," in *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*, ed. W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
3. Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy: The Evolution of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.
4. For an example, see Liana Winett, "Advocates Guide to Developing Framing Memos," in *Do the Media Govern?* ed. Shanto Iyengar and Richard Reeves (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997), 420–427.
5. For the definitive statement of this notion, see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).
6. For an example of this sort of analysis as applied by so-called "progressive activists," see Michael Pertschuk, "Putting Media Effects Research to Work: Lessons for Community Groups Who Would Be Heard," in *Do the Media Govern*, 391–400. To see why the term "progressive activists" is itself a demonstration of the art, see Jarol B. Manheim, *Biz-War and the Out-of-Power Elite: Anti-Corporate Activism and the Attack on the Corporation* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 82–88.
7. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy*, 139–142.
8. Manheim, *All of the People*, 69–73.
9. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy*, 160–162.
10. Jarol B. Manheim, *The Death of a Thousand Cuts: Corporate Campaigns and the Attack on the Corporation* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001). An annotated list of approximately two hundred such efforts from their inception through 1999 is found on pages 311–339.
11. James Worsham, "Labor's New Assault," *Nation's Business* (June 1997): 16.
12. See Manheim, *Biz-War*, esp. 169–173; and Jarol B. Manheim, *Power Failure, Power Surge: Union Pension Fund Activism and the Publicly Held Corporation* (Washington, D.C.: HR Policy Association, 2005).
13. Carole Gorney, "Litigation Journalism Is a Scourge," *New York Times*, February 15, 1993, A15.