Using social media dialogically: Public relations role in reviving democracy

Michael L. Kent*

University of Oklahoma, 395 W. Lindsey, Norman, OK 73019–4201, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Dialogue
Dialogic
Communitarianism
Long Now
Technology
Social media

ABSTRACT

This article explores how technology and our recent access to, and abundance of, information, are affecting democracy, and the role of public relations professionals in a post mass media society. The article reviews pros and cons of new technology, discusses how public relations can improve, democracy using dialogue, communitarianism, and Long Now thinking, and discusses how to actually, use social media dialogically. The article argues that as public relations revives its conceptualization of, relationship, communication professionals also benefit democracy and society as a whole.

For more than a century in the United States, citizens obtained the information that was needed for the maintenance of democracy, the pursuit of commerce, the protection of the nation, our cultural beliefs, and our personal values from the mass media, and discussion and debate with their fellow citizens (cf., Postman, 1984). Public relations professionals understand that research and access to information about stakeholders, stakeholders, publics, issues, the economy, and hundreds of other areas are at the heart of all effective public relations. Democracy is similar. Informed citizens enact democracy using a variety of public and private information.

But in the ‘90s, the Internet changed things. Technology began to transform democracy. Two decades ago, the Internet was heralded as the greatest communication tool of all time: “The Information superhighway,” capable of linking remote parts of the world, and transforming democracy and education (cf., Kent, 2001). Unfortunately, the Internet has not lived up to its hype, especially as it pertains to public relations.

This article explores the role of public relations professionals in a post mass media society, as well as how technology and our recent access to, and abundance of, information are affecting democracy. The article is divided into four sections. The first section reviews the role of information and technology in a democracy. The second section reviews some of the pros and cons of new technology. The third section discusses how public relations can improve democracy using dialogue, communitarianism, and Long Now thinking, and how to use social media dialogically. The fourth section concludes with a call for more organization–public interaction.

1. Information, democracy, and technology

Because of technology, organizational spokespersons are no longer forced to rely on their relationships with media gatekeepers and the information subsidy to get word out about organizational activities to stakeholders and publics. Americans now regularly obtain information of value directly from organizations via social media, hand-held devices, etc. Technology has changed the way that citizens obtain and weigh information, and the way that public relations functions.

* Tel.: +1 405 325 7346.
E-mail addresses: MKent@OU.edu, CaptainVoid@gmail.com

0363-8111/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.07.024
For decades, beat reporters, and specialist journalists gathered news in coherent areas (crime, law, health, politics, education). Journalistic gatekeepers, most of whom were more knowledgeable about their specialized areas than the average citizen, controlled information, but also made decision about what information was the most newsworthy to the majority of citizens. When the number of news channels were limited, up until the 1980s, broadcasters and print journalists served essential roles in democracy. They were the “fourth estate,” protecting the people by reporting on government and society. Being well informed has always been considered a sign of wisdom, and journalists helped keep people informed and served as a safeguard against demagoguery.

However, as news and information sources gradually become more pervasive, because of 24-h news cycles, the Internet, and abundant real-time technologies, publics became more fragmented and harder to reach. The Internet opened up new sources for news and information, special interest groups were able to reach potential supporters directly. The Internet broke the illusion of shared public knowledge and forced people to individually decide what to pay attention to. Every citizen is now a media gatekeeper.

From a democratic standpoint, a society that does not care about what is happening is not a democracy. True democracy requires vigilance and participation, not passivity and isolation. Citizens need to be harmonized not atomized. The same is true for public relations. Many professionals spend more time worrying about posting to their organization’s social media sites than what their actual strategic communication goal is (cf., Kent, Carr, Husted, & Pop, 2011). The medium has come to matter more than the message. Public relations has the ability to build communities, and diverse communities are at the core of democracy.

1.1. Public media, public issues, and social media

For democratic participation and oversight to occur, a populace needs to be informed about public issues, not simply one’s individual private area of interest. For generations, citizens were kept informed by the mass media. Up until about the mid ‘90s, a citizen could read a local and national newspaper each day, watch the local and national news in the evening, and maybe 60 Minutes on Sunday, and feel fairly well informed about the public issues of importance to most citizens, since everyone else obtained their news and information from the same sources.

Unfortunately, because of corporate media consolidation throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s (Bagdikian, 2004; cf., also, www.corporations.org/media), the US media landscape is now controlled by just five mega media corporations (and even more consolidation was approved in December 2012). Although citizens might have felt informed by reading the newspaper, their reservoir of local, state, national, and international knowledge was shallow. As newspaper publishers, broadcasters, book publishers, music labels, movie houses, and other entertainment industries merged, any hope of balanced public information evaporated (cf., Bagdikian, 1992; Schiller, 1989).

Ironically, perhaps the final blow to the mass media’s ability to deliver essential information to citizens was probably struck by the Internet and social media, which have turned news content into personal entertainment and editorial, and shifted to “user generated content” as a means of filling time. Media consolidation and social media have now placed the burden of learning about important information and weighing sources of information, squarely on the shoulders of the average citizen. Indeed, social media and new technology actually make it more difficult for the average person to stay informed, as members of a democracy should.

With the shift away from mainstream media and professional gatekeepers who made editorial decisions, citizens have increasingly come to rely on a greater diversity of news sources (some more credible than others), and more idiosyncratic voices that appeal to individual citizens’ unique interests. Without the aid of credible gatekeepers and media professionals, democracy is hobbled, just as it is by having its media controlled by only five mega-corporations.

1.2. Where citizens get their news from matters

As technology expanded, first with Cable Television, and then the Internet, many argued that people would have the opportunity to obtain more, and better, information (cf., Kent, 2001; Meehan, 1988). In practice, however, more news “potential” did not equal more–diverse voices, opinions, or ideas, only more of the same. Our Internet search technologies and social media are similar, in that people often get more of what they want and like, rather than what they need or should see to be good citizens.

In the fragmented world of self-selected media, finding examples of basic democratic responsibilities: citizens being involved in governance, being involved in decision-making, and overseeing the activities of lawmakers, is hard (Held, 1987a). Similarly, ensuring that the principles of democratic accountability where lawmakers are accountable to the people and make decisions with the best interest of the nation at heart is equally uncommon. People spend more time with technology and access to information than ever before, but probably engage democracy less than at any point in history, since technology has made filtering out the negative voices and opinions of others so easy.

As a recent study by the PEW Internet and American Life Project suggests most people (66%) ignore political posts from friends that they disagree with, and about 36% of the time someone is “unfriended,” it is because of a political related posting or comment (Rainie & Smith, 2012, pp. 2–3). Other studies have found similar trends; people are simply blocking and filtering out the voices and ideas that they do not want to encounter. Changes in social media, journalism, and new technology have
made disengaging from political life easier, and essentially encourage people to ignore information that is ideologically unpleasant. A consideration of the pros and cons of technology should help contextualize what is happening.

2. Technology and democracy pros and cons

Technology has played a role in US democracy since the founding of the country. In the beginning of the republic, the printing press was used to bring news and information to citizens. The Federalist Papers, for example, a series of 85 political commentaries calling for ratification of the US Constitution, written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, were actually serialized in the weekly newspapers. The content of the Federalist Papers consisted of complex political and philosophical argumentation.

Roughly a century later, radio emerged, followed by television in the middle of the 20th century. With each new innovation, slight changes were introduced into how people obtained and made sense of political information. In president Lincoln’s day, politicians went from town to town and gave hours long stump speeches (cf., Postman, 1984), but the bulk of public political information was still found in newspapers. As public relations slowly evolved out of our roles as World War II and corporate propagandists, professionals used the mass media to share information with stakeholders and publics.

New technology has altered 70-years of democratic public relations practices. The Internet allows citizens to obtain real time news and information from thousands of online sources. In only two decades, we have seen profound changes that include news sites and online newspapers, online wire services, RSS, news aggregators, streaming video, Internet search tools, blogging, social media, user generated news content, podcasts, discussion groups, listservs, Internet telephony (VOIP, Skype), webometric/analytic software, and communication via hand-held devices such as iPhones, iPads, Kindle, Android, and more. Public relations professionals have enthusiastically embraced each new technology, making communication technologies one of the most studied areas of the field (cf., Ye & Ki, 2012), and one of the most promising for improving democracy. In spite of all the positives that technology offers, technology also has negatives.

2.1. The negatives of new technology

A number of areas of concern exist in regard to new technologies that include social behaviors, chronic perception, patience and delayed gratification, political participation, and the (until recently) historically slow progression of technological innovations. But the positive features of technology are often so tantalizing that users have trouble looking past the shiny interfaces.

On the most basic level, technology has changed the pace of society. People now expect answers to questions sent by e-mail and text messages to come in minutes and hours. Individuals and organizations that take days to respond are seen as aberrations. The idea of thoughtful discussion and weighing alternatives now seems anachronistic. Cell phones and handheld devices enable people to communicate from almost anywhere, with almost anyone, at any time of the day or night.

Because of wireless ubiquity, employees are more easily reached by employers, leisure and vacation time has become less personal and less relaxing, and, younger and younger children are having their lives scheduled and controlled by the logic of technology (Gandossy, 2007; Regan, 2007; Robins & Webster, 1988; Stoll, 1995). People’s desire for instant gratification has been met through streaming Internet technologies, online shopping, and access to the world’s biggest database of entertainment and information.

The increased pace of life and the shift from face-to-face social interaction to technological interaction also means that people often enact their political participation online, rather than with other people. In many ways, politics has become a private activity. Why engage other people in uncomfortable conversations when you can just unfriend (or ignore) them?

However, the conclusion that each technology has its own telos is unsatisfying. Technologies interact. We know from the history of technological evolution that how we think about the world is largely shaped by our technology (McLuhan, 1999/1964). Table 1 shows some of that evolution by highlighting a number of the most influential technological (r)evolutions that have occurred over the last 100 years.

What Table 1 shows is actually a fairly slow progression of technology up through the ’90s. Before the Internet in 1993, three things stand out, cellular telephones in 1993, and Macintosh and Windows based computers a few years later. Then, we have an eight year gap before we get 2G cellular technology, a ten year gap before 3G, and a ten year gap before 4G. The same decadal progression characterizes communication innovations via the Internet: search engines and blogging emerge in the mid ’90s, Second Life, Skype, and Facebook about ten years later, Twitter a few years after that, but, unless you count Pinterest, not much has happened since Twitter in 2006. And when we consider how little has been done with HTML and organizational web sites in the last 20 years, or the fact that people have had email for forty years, and Listservs and newsgroups for thirty years (CRNT was founded in 1985), a reasonable question to ask public relations professionals is “what did you do with all of the other technologies that came before?”

The use of technology by public relations professionals to inform stakeholders and publics has languished. In the academy and professional world, many spend their time encouraging students to tweet, but spend virtually no time talking about the strategic communication potential of our established technologies and what the possibilities are. The average student or communication professional probably cannot name five things that are strategically possible with the Internet that do
not involve using social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The remainder of this paper is devoted to talking about what public relations professionals can do with technology that both advances democracy, as well as public relations.

3. How can public relations improve democracy?

The social changes that are being wrought by new technology are not inevitable. Every new technology (both software and hardware) changes the chemistry of democratic communication. As McLuhan (1999/1964) suggested almost fifty years ago, technologies are not “either or,” but “both and.” For example, as voice recognition with technologies like Apple’s Siri become a standard feature in other technologies over the next five to ten years, micro-blogging tools like Twitter will undoubtedly be transformed or replaced. Twitter is convenient in a world of messaging typed on tiny keyboards. However, Twitter’s 140 characters could easily be replaced by 140 words. Indeed, in China, 140 characters is already 140 words.

In current practice, public relations professionals use social media as marketing and advertising tools (cf., Taylor & Kent, 2010). Communication professionals need to stop seeing new technology as simply a sales tool and consider how it can be used in more robust activities: relationship building, problem solving, crowd sourcing, design improvement, etc. Social media and related technologies have tremendous untapped potential. A focus on relationship building via dialogue and
communitarianism principles, as well as a long-term world view of the world via a “Long Now” orientation will eventually lead to a more robust profession.

3.1. Democracy and dialogue in public relations

Going back thousands of years to the ancient Greeks, dialectic and dialogue were considered important tools of democracy. Although scholars have been talking seriously about dialogue in public relations for more than a decade (cf., Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pearson, 1989), most academics and professionals have done almost nothing with it. As Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2013) recently argued about the various studies of dialogic social media, dialogue is an abstract process that is hard to implement: dialogue, “as it stands, is not only deeply philosophical but also abstract in nature. While these characteristics make it attractive as an ideal toward which to strive, it is difficult to operationalize such abstract notions in practice” (p. 6).

Contrary to the name, the professional use of dialogue is a sophisticated, technical skill, not simply a matter of talking to other people. In professional practice, many mistakenly believe that dialogue is just communicating with others: tweeting status updates, posting content to one’s Facebook account. Ultimately, dialogue is a one-on-one relational tool. Dialogue is not about mass communication. Dialogue represents a relational give and take that occurs between two people, or in small groups, that observe strict rules of decorum to maintain fairness, trust, and the opportunity for all involved to express their opinion. Dialogue is an orientation toward communication with others, not a simple procedure or process. Dialogic encounters can build long-lasting relationships, but dialogue as a professional tool is much more.

The question is, then, in an age of new technology and virtual encounters, whether a tool like dialogue is even viable as a public relations tool. How can dialogue be used by public relations professionals, and how can dialogue be used to build or strengthen democracy? The problem is not with the medium of the Internet; the problem, quite simply, is with the application and intent. Because of social media technology, public relations professionals have regressed from our role as organization–public relationship builders and counselors, to marketers, advertisers, and strategic communicators.

To use social media for relationship building (discussed below) means we think about social media differently. Rather than social media being a cheap and easy way to reach stakeholders and publics with organizational messages, social media should be reenvisioned as interpersonal and group communication tools, and not a replacement for a weakened mass media. Using social media in public relations requires more than just the tool that dialogue provides; we also need an ideological shift. Communication professionals need to change how they think about publics.

3.2. The pragmatics of a dialogic social media

Saying that social media need to be more dialogic is easy. The question is, how to actually use social media better. The focus of public relations professionals’ use of social media should be to build relationships, solve problems, and enact socially responsible goals. Suggestions include:

First, parallel, or alternative, social media spaces should be developed where organizational members actually communicate with individuals and not members of a collective, like customers. Dialogic social media web sites are not intended as places where thousands or tens of thousands of people passively wait for messages, but as active participatory places where organizational managers, leaders, and professionals actually communicate with individual human beings.

Second, dialogic social media spaces should not be enacted through existing social media venues like Twitter or Facebook, filled with advertisements and distractions, and poorly designed for substantive, interactive, discussions. New social media interfaces should be adopted or designed to allow organizational members and stakeholders/publics to freely interact and collaborate. Indeed, old-school tools like listervs, and threaded dialogue still have value.

Third, the identity of participants should be public and verifiable. All participants’ identities should be known to the other participants. Dialogue is not conducted with anonymous parties but with human being who have names and faces.

Fourth, clear rules should exist for participation. One of the fundamental dialogic rules is that members are able to question the rules at any time (cf., Pearson, 1989). Rules are designed to further discussions, not privilege the organization or any particular members. Rules might include. (1) Members should be identifiable (as suggested above). (2) All members are expected to participate (dialogic social media are not places for lurkers). To be a member of a dialogic discussion means you are willing to share your insight and beliefs. (3) Participants should provide support and evidence for all claims. (4) Whenever possible, conversations should take place in real time. Threaded dialogue can be incorporated, but synchronous discussions (perhaps via audio and visual interfaces like Skype) with other people should be the norm.

Fifth, experts should be sought out and invited to participate. However, any interested party, including the media, competitors, academics, and customers should be allowed to participate.

Sixth, divergent voices should be nurtured and encouraged to participate. Small group theory, the theory of Groupthink, as well as the Delphi methodology, all suggest that the more voices the better. Reasoned dissent should be encouraged and everyone should be given a chance to participate.
3.3. Building community through Communitarianism and the Long Now

For dialogue to be used effectively by organizations and public relations professionals, managers and practitioners at all levels should also draw upon principles of communitarianism (Etzioni, 1993) and Long Now thinking (www.longnow.org). Relationships are not built to exploit publics.

3.3.1. What is communitarianism?

The communitarian movement is a philosophical group committed to shifting the emphasis in society from individual rights, to collective responsibilities. As Etzioni (1993) has written: “no economy can thrive if greed is so overpowering that few have a motive to invest in the long run and the highest rewards go to those who engage in financial manipulations rather than constructive enterprises” (p. 29).

Communitarians believe that corporations should engage in corporate social responsibility, that citizens should be concerned about others, and that people need to shift their focus away from getting all that they can get (individualism) to a more collectivist focus that considers other citizens, civil society groups, ethnic groups, and social classes (cf., Held, 1987b). The principles of the Long Now, an ideology in concert with both dialogue and communitarianism, can help to enact both.

3.3.2. What is Long Now thinking?

Long Now thinking is a focus on the future that necessitates collaboration, putting the community ahead of the individual or organization, and enacting democratic ideals. Established in 1996, the Long Now Foundation is a group of scientists, artists, futurists, researchers, and critical thinkers (currently more than 4700 members) who believe that “Civilization is reviving itself into a pathologically short attention span” (longnow.org/about). The members of the Long Now believe, “Some sort of balancing corrective to the short-sightedness is needed—some mechanism or myth which encourages the long view and the taking of long-term responsibility, where ‘long-term’ is measured at least in centuries” (ibid).

According to the Long Now Foundation’s, “Guidelines for a long-lived, long-valuable institution” Long Now principles include: serving the long view, fostering responsibility, rewarding patience, minding mythic depth, allying with competition, taking no sides, and leveraging longevity.” The principles of long now thinking (discussed below) are consistent with basic principles of democracy, dialogue, and communitarianism.

If we look at the use of social media by most large corporations, we see that the communication tools that were invented for “sociality” are typically used in a one-way fashion to push messages out to publics. The unidirectional messaging points to the desire of individuals to remain in their own mediated cocoon, consuming self-selected entertainment. Communitarianism, Dialogue, and Long Now thinking work to change the nature of organization–public communication by asking professional communicators to engage stakeholders and publics on equal ground and actually treating people as valued friends and colleagues who can help an organization move forward.

3.4. Dialogic solutions: how to reengage citizens, stakeholders, and publics

Humans are social animals. As long as we construct our messages and relationships with stakeholders and publics as tools of convenience and opportunism, as opportunities for individuals to gather rather than as public spaces, we will continue to see an erosion of democracy. Public relations professionals need to put a stop to the practice of using stakeholders and publics to satisfy our organizational ends, and work to rebuild democratic ideals and public awareness. The key to how to do this lies in thinking about our technological spaces dialogically:

1. When we construct social spaces for individuals and publics, what we should talk about is what stakeholders and publics want to talk about. Serving the interests of our stakeholders actually serves our own interests.

So much of what passes as social media research in public relations is just marketing and advertising in disguise. Democracy, dialogue, communitarianism, and Long Now thinking all take into account others. Our organization–public communication should cease to be simply sender to receiver where organizations try to give stakeholders and publics what they think they want, to keep them entertained—what public relations did 75-years ago. Instead, our communication and strategic planning should start by asking stakeholders for feedback before the fact not after the fact.

The good organization acting well (Heath, 2001) should be our mantra. Social media and new technologies should be used to raise topics and facilitate discussions, not simply to offer coupons and discounts or advertise products. From a public relations standpoint, our use of social media should be different than advertising or marketing’s use.

2. Social media needs to be genuinely social, or not at all. When all public relations professionals can envision for social media is social marketing, we have missed our calling.

Through the magic of social media and the Internet we can bring together thousands of people and share content in almost any form (printed, video, audio, graphical, etc.). Democracy is enacted by citizens, or, in the case of public relations, stakeholders and publics.
Currently, the use of social media by politicians and public relations professionals is similar: unidirectional, image marketing, focused on raising money and encouraging sales, but not on what stakeholders and citizens really want or need. In spite of the enormous potential of social media to do so much more, the online tools are primarily used asymmetrically. Public relations professionals need to change that. Relationships are built on risk, trust, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and interaction (i.e., dialogue).

Engaging citizens (or publics) is one of the central roles of leaders in a democracy (cf., Held, 1987a). Dialogic organizations that make decisions with all stakeholders in mind, rather than just elites (shareholders, managers), serve democracy and their entire organization.

3. **Public spaces and collective decision-making need to be revived.** The best decisions are challenged, and are made through consultation with outsiders and experts.

A democracy is successful because of the collective wisdom of its citizens and leaders. A democracy is an excellent choice as a model for public relations. Unfortunately, social media have interrupted the democratic processes that have guided public decision making for almost two centuries. Social media allow for symbolic participation rather than genuine participation, making people feel a part of the process but giving no one a genuine voice (cf., Kent, Harrison, & Taylor, 2006).

Instead of corporate managers, CEOs, and business leaders meeting behind closed doors to make decisions, public relations professionals should push for more inclusiveness, more transparency, more stakeholder input, more public input, more lectures, and more physical and virtual spaces where people can come and talk about ideas and issues. Just as we expect our legislators to know what the electorate believes and to act in the best interest of the many and not the few, public relations professionals need to enact the same behavior. “Community” should become something that people draw strength and comfort from, rather than virtual communities of strangers with no actual stake in people’s lives.

4. **Taking the time to become more widely informed and acting as organizational counsels rather than corporate Tweeters should be a priority.**

Informed citizens are the cornerstones of a democracy, and keeping stakeholders and publics informed has been a cornerstone of public relations for half a century. Concurrently, the fragmentation of information, brought on by the Internet and social media, self isolation, and targeted advertising and marketing have resulted in a citizenry that seemingly has access to more information than ever before, but in practice, is relatively unaware of the big picture and never asked to evaluate conflicting policy options.

As professional communicators and agents of democracy, public relations professionals need to operate outside of their own comfort zones in terms of exposure to information and research. Communication professionals need to invite in competing voices and encourage outsiders and the disenfranchised to help us deliberate and solve substantive organizational and social problems. Public relations professionals as organizational spokespeople, have a lot to give to democracy as we act as organizational counselors, consciences, and bring diverse voices and information to our organizations.

5. **The focus of communication professionals needs to be on the long-term and not the short term.** The principles of the Long Now provide a guideline:

- “Serving the long view,” which hints at the importance of shifting our focus from our feet to the horizon, from quarterly profits to decadal achievements, from corporate and stockholder goals to stakeholder and public goals.
- “Fostering responsibility,” means institutionalizing it. Dishonest employees are fired not given bonuses, etc. Deceptive communicators and organizations are penalized and shunned. Laws and actions that make public communication safer and more private are supported. Online privacy should not be something people have to negotiate with organizations about, nor should organizations work to exploit personal information for corporate gain. Being ethical and responsible should be how professional communicators behave.
- “Rewarding patience” needs to replace the short term, instant gratification mentality. People do not need to know what organizations are doing on a minute-by-minute basis via Twitter or Facebook. Stakeholders and publics are better served by thoughtful, thorough, and relevant information delivered not by interns tweeting, but by senior managers and organizational leaders communicating publicly via (actual or online) “town-halls,” webcasts, research papers and white papers, high-quality infographics rather than eye-candy, websites that contain complete information, etc.
- “Minding mythic depth,” means living up to heroic standards. Rather than taking a lowest common denominator approach, we ask our publics, and ourselves to be the best we can. Organization–public communication should be easy, but not passive. In ethical organizations, email addresses and contact information are made public not hidden, threaded dialogue is encouraged and examined by organizational managers and leaders and brought forward in organizational discussions. Activists are not seen as the enemy but as part of an organizational conscience.
- “Allying with competition” is about working to make the world better. If the major players in an industry can agree to use more environmentally friendly materials, everyone benefits. Talk to people who are different. When all organizational members, stakeholders, and stakeseekers, participate in decisions about the future, everyone benefits.
• “Taking no sides,” means that if the competition comes up with a better solution, support it. Thomas Edison is famous for opposing AC current because he did not invent it, and because he already had substantial personal investments in DC current. AC was more useful for long-distance electrification. AC won. But Edison still went around the country for years electrocuting dogs and cats and in one case an elephant, in his efforts to discredit AC current. In our role as organizational counselors, public relations professionals need to be the most well informed, widely read, person in the organization.

The good of a company and the good of the nation should not be decided by narrow, short-term, profit-driven, interests. When we consider that According to Bloomberg Businessweek “The average life expectancy of a multinational corporation—Fortune 500 or its equivalent—is between 40 and 50 years. . . . [That] 40% of all newly created companies last less than 10 years. . . . [And that] the average life expectancy of all firms, regardless of size . . . is only 12.5 years” (www.businessweek.com/chapter/degeus.htm), we have to ask why so many organizations fight change. Long lived organizations adapt.

• “Leverage longevity” and stop taking sides. When a business’ activities only serve short terms profits, we should drop the practice or oppose it.

The fact that public relations can play a role in making democracy better should be obvious. What is often less obvious is how we can do it. Our actions as communication professionals shape how millions of others see our companies, our products and services, and other human beings. Practicing genuinely social, social media, enacting dialogue both internally, externally, and in electronic contexts, and enacting communitarian principles and principles of the Long Now, are things that public relations professionals can do. Ultimately, for such activities to bear fruit will take decades, but if we do nothing, democracy and civil society will become increasingly weaker.

4. Conclusion

Most of the social media technologies that were supposed to connect people to others, stimulate our democracy, and enable every citizen to participate in the life of the mind, have largely had just the opposite effect. As public communicators, we control perhaps the most important resource in a democracy: information. To date, our lack of understanding of new technology, and implementation of new technologies simply to serve marketing and advertising interests have led to less civic participation, and less awareness of what is happening in the world around us. Indeed, for more than three decades, scholars have argued that new technologies have negative as well as positive aspects, but we have mostly ignored the negatives (cf., Burnham, 1984; Kent, 2008; Postman, 1993; Stoll, 1995, 1999; Taylor & Kent, 2010; Vallee, 1982).

So many of our new technologies have vastly more potential. Study after study posits that social media are diabolic, but the operationalization of dialogue often looks like online advertising and product promotion. For decades, we have argued that our communication technologies will connect us, but that connectivity to our “friends” on social media comes at the expense of isolation from our fellow human beings who live next door or down the hall. Obviously, social media are a tool that can be used better.

Dealing with the impact of technology on political and social life is not easy. There are no quick fixes that public relations can enact. However, if we go back to our professional roots as informed organizational counselors, we begin to see that being critical, and being informed, are the first steps. We need to begin enacting some of the principles of long-term thinking and relationship building with all of our stakeholders and stakeholders: employees, customers, management, industry peers, and others. The solution is not found in the less sophisticated interactions that we have had with social media, but through richer, more inclusive interactions.

References


