

Provocations on the future of promotional industries and scholarship



LSE's [Department of Media and Communications](#) celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2023, and recently marked the occasion with the [Media Futures Conference](#) held on 15-16 June. To celebrate the Department's contribution to media and communications research and teaching over the last 20 years, we are publishing a series of reflections from faculty. Here [Lee Edwards](#), Professor of Strategic Communications and Public Engagement, considers the future of promotional industries and how to study them.

I start this post with the idea of provocations as tipping points, points of inflection, and points of potential change. On the occasion of the Department's 20th anniversary, I want to look ahead and think about how these points might shape the future of promotional industries, work and scholarship.

Strategic communication was not a discipline that garnered much respect two decades ago, when the Department was founded. It was perceived as a practical course, very much tied to organisational interests, and focused on business above all. It fitted within the agenda of university business schools, but struggled to be recognised as a critical academic discipline: a focus for analyses of power, inequalities, and (in)justice. Fast forward to today, and the landscape has changed. Strategic communications now – including its alternatively named degrees in promotional industries, or public relations – has become a recognised arena where a community of scholars actively deconstructs the normative business approach, engaging with organisational communications practices not as a route for institutional success, but as a fulcrum of power.

This is the starting point for my reflections about the future of strategic communications

and, more broadly, promotional scholarship. As a critical scholar, engaging with power is central to all my work – and yet analysing power in relation to strategic communications is never simple, because promotional work (of which strategic communication is a part) is an essentially ambivalent practice. Promotion necessarily happens in relationships – through interactions between producers of promotional information and their audiences. It is a social activity, like all communication, and it is therefore unpredictable. Outcomes are never certain. Promotion generates its own future in this sense, because as it is implemented, it invokes new possibilities of meaning-making. These alternative meanings invoke the need for more strategic communication – more response, more confirmation, more adjustment – so the cycle of promotion repeats.

The unpredictability of promotional communication also provides opportunities, and sometimes those opportunities are more obvious when the view of promotion goes beyond specific campaigns. Indeed, the outcomes of individual campaigns can have a broader influence when aggregated across a sector, or when connected to ideological positions at a societal level, creating the possibility of shifts in the balance of power. So, for example, the MeToo movement scaled up from [Tarana Burke's](#) coining of the phrase on My Space in 2006, to an industry-wide call to action ten years later through the Harvey Weinstein case, to a global movement that made sexual harassment a public issue across many societies. MeToo had its own power structures (why was Tarana Burke's first initiative less visible? Why were powerful actresses in Hollywood listened to more readily?) but it also worked against dominant groups. So one provocation is to ask, where might such movements emerge again?

We can consider what issues might produce these points of possibility; the most important ones are likely to be those that raise fundamental ethical challenges about who we are, how we want to live together, and how we want our past to inform our future. They will definitely be visible in current crises such as climate change, AI justice, data surveillance, but they may take more time in burgeoning but as yet lower profile issues: indigenous rights, for example, or the inhumanity and inequality of incarceration, or poverty and class-based inequalities.

Within these moments of possibility, tipping points come and go. They are not always good. We observe, and will continue to observe, the ways in which strategic communication is used to make the pendulum swing towards extremes. Promotional industries will continue to promote division and antagonism rather than genuine

deliberative debate and discussion. The difficulty here is that promotion is not regulated, formally defined, or even monitored – so it is easily available for use in a ‘wild west’ of tit for tat arguments that polarise rather than connect. The weaponisation of promotion by those who have the ability to secure a high level of visibility and circulation will continue, and as the channels for addressing audiences and securing attention continue to proliferate, this tendency will only increase.

Yet, these tendencies will also be balanced by voices that argue instead for reasonable engagement. Demands for apologies for colonial violence, for example, have moved to include demands for reparations, – [not through sensationalist and polarising claims](#), but by setting out the detail of expropriation and disinheritance that slavery has imposed. Perhaps unexpectedly, [some corporations](#) have led the way, and the [idea](#) of a corporate role in reparations continues to circulate. Demands for climate action have been extended to legal suits against governments – for example, [Swiss senior women sued their government in the European Court of Human Rights](#) for failing to reduce the country’s greenhouse gas emissions. These actions are being taken by people who counter the norm of promotion as being the domain of formalised organisations, but who recognise the importance of promotion, and its value as a tool for activism if used systematically and in conjunction with other societal infrastructures. Again, as promotional channels and tools proliferate and as successes for different movements become visible, activism will retain and build on its already prolific use of these tools.

It is also essential to consider how the tools of promotion are changing – or staying the same. Clearly, technology is evolving and the advent of ChatGPT has the capacity to fundamentally alter the character of promotion. In this sense, the promotional industries may be at the forefront of change. As [Clea Bourne](#) has argued, the datafication of promotional work, including AI, makes a substantive difference to how we understand agency in the industries. When we think of promotion, we think of promoters – people working in the industry, planning campaigns, developing messages, responding to audiences. But once data and AI tools (search engine optimisation, chatbots, trolls, ChatGPT, deep fakes) are integrated into promotional infrastructures, the very idea of the promotional actor evolves. Is it algorithms that are doing the persuading, online infrastructure, or people? How does that change how we could, should or will respond to promotional content that we agree or disagree with? What does it do to our ability to discuss the ethics of this kind of communication, if we don’t have an opponent? Will ‘the

algorithm' be invoked as a locus of responsibility? Who is the 'strategic communicator', and how do we make them accountable? Currently, debates about technology and datafication tend to elide the importance of its promotional uses (with some important exceptions) into general discussions about surveillance, extraction, capital and colonialism. But bending data to promotional interests is now a quotidian activity, and scholars in our discipline need to grapple with this.

Finally, we might wonder how these technological changes will reshape the industries themselves. They are multi-billion-dollar entities, and include the smallest local agencies as well as the largest transnational conglomerates. They promote their ability to build relationships, to make connections, deliver expertise, to provide strategic direction, to advise on conversations and engagement. How do changing technologies fit into this world? Do they empower or disempower the industries? Will expertise be replaced by analytics as the most important skill? These trends remain somewhat unclear, and perhaps one thing we will see is the evolution of the industry's own claims to legitimacy, as audience knowledge becomes increasingly quantified, and strategic communications becomes automated.

These provocations may seem open-ended, but this is precisely because they are grounded in the ambivalence of promotion itself, the openness of practice to different possible uses and outcomes; the power dynamics of the context in which it is deployed; and the infrastructures in which it is integrated and to which it has become fundamental. The only certainty is that it will remain a key element of society's infrastructures, a discursive intervention that moves not only opinion and perceptions, but also material resources as it (re)configures the worlds we inhabit.

This post represents the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.