

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social
Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

*Rhetoric and the integration
of society*

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Public influence in modern society

The complexities and intricacies of modern society are disturbing and perplexing. As observers we wonder how cohesion is possible in societies that can no longer be integrated by uniform adherence to conventional norms, and as citizens we search for public policies that can effectively include diverse people with disparate interests in a single societal community. We are tempted to conclude, with Yeats, that the center cannot hold.

What is this “center” that is losing its grip? Some observers assert that there is a special sector of society with specifically integrative functions, a sector variously identified as the public, societal community, or civil society, or possibly located in particular institutions such as law or voluntary association. Others question the authenticity of integrative institutions, even in democratic societies, charging that these institutions are mere covers for class and state domination. They doubt the independence and autonomy of so-called integrative institutions and deny that such institutions can provide moral guidance for society. This dispute goes beyond abstract sociological theorizing about social integration, for what is at stake are conceptions of the social foundations of democratic social orders.

In the traditions of democratic theory, hopes for a vital center have rested on establishment of a properly organized public life. Self-guidance of a modern society depends on a public capable of discussing and resolving issues and forming an effectual collective will. The ideals of public discussion were well stated by the Enlightened philosophers in the eighteenth century, but by the mid twentieth century, many critical thinkers had concluded that prospects for enlightenment in the modern world were dim. Horkheimer and Adorno, in their influential book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972 [1947]), saw the rise of the “culture industry” as transforming communicated meaning into standardized, manipulable

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Rhetoric and the integration of society

bits, which could no longer be tools for forging authentic public culture. Fifteen years later, Jürgen Habermas, (1989 [1962]), heir to the traditions of Horkheimer and Adorno and the Frankfurt school of critical thought, examined the outcome of the public life inaugurated during the Enlightenment and concluded that its premises had failed in the nineteenth century when elites refused to allow the emerging working class access to public space. In the twentieth century, the rise of technical, instrumental reason threatened to vitiate the process of public discussion. These trends became apparent in American political communication and campaigning in the late 1950s and, accelerating over the next thirty-five years, brought about the forms of public life that I refer to in this book as the New Public.

The New Public

In the New Public, communication is dominated by professional specialists. The techniques employed by these specialists are historically rooted in commercial promotion, but beginning in the 1950s, rationalized techniques of persuasion born of advertising, market research, and public relations were systematically applied to political communication. As this movement took flight in the 1970s and exploded in the 1980s and 1990s, political consultants, media specialists, public opinion pollsters, professional grassroots organizers, specialized lobbyists, focus group organizers, specialists in issue research, and demographic researchers burgeoned in numbers and established increasingly specialized roles. Political consultants now specialize in fields as narrow as strategies for countering negative advertising. The experts of the New Public have brought us the often impugned methods of civic persuasion that now dominate public communication: sound-bite journalism, thirty-second political advertising, one-way communication, evasive spin control by public figures who refuse to answer questions, and the marketing of ideas and candidates by methods developed in commercial market research.

Some of these roles have become conjoined in new approaches to public influence. Lobbying, though an old profession, now uses new methods that integrate the specialized contributions of market research, pollsters, purchased policy research, partisan studies done in “think tanks,” and the efforts of other agents of communication not previously involved in shaping public opinion, such as public accountants. Political consulting has also flourished, integrating a similar array of differentiated contributions. The systematic conjoining of the expertise of varied political specialists has produced professional “grassroots” lobbying, often called astroturf

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

lobbying, for it creates the appearance of support by artificial means, not by grassroots discussion. It has also promoted a process that I refer to as “the certification of facts.” Professional political operatives now orchestrate the testimony of experts to create the appearance of factual foundations for political positions.

These new specialized techniques suggest manipulation and furnish evidence for critics who proclaim the decline of the public, and judge democratic institutions, including elections, to be a sham. Political communication, say the critics, merely manufactures consent, rather than allowing discursive formulations of policy in the public interest. When influence is fully paid for and serves a process of reaching compromises among powerful private interests, it is not realistic to call the sphere of influence a guiding “system” or to claim that influence is the currency of a differentiated integrative realm, emancipated from political and economic pressures. Influence cannot be idealized if it is cooked in the back rooms of influence specialists who manipulate behind the scenes rather than in settings designed for truly public discourse. Rhetoric calculated by experts belongs in the category of fraud – a type of coercion. To the critics, this rhetoric is surely not rational argument but the “cooking” of which Plato so disparagingly spoke.

The public is not a realm of complete consensus. It is an arena of conflict and debate, sometimes polite, sometimes rancorous, often indecisive. Like the economy and the polity, the public works imperfectly. Just as economic and political systems fail to match the overblown expectations of ideological defenders of free market economies and expert bureaucracies, so does the public often fail to produce consensual and effective answers to integrative questions. The public engages in contesting and creating meaning, not in applying norms to the resolution of conflict by simple acts of deduction that are accepted by acclamation. Nevertheless, the integrative significance of public life cannot be dismissed, even in the atmosphere created by the institutions of the New Public. In the course of public discussion – persuasive discourse founded on influence rather than force – people find ratification of identities, they reinforce or discover memberships and meaningful attachments to groups larger than the groups that bear their primary solidarities. Opinions are shaped and mobilized in the service of collective action, and situationally specific norms are created. Insofar as these processes work, people are able to resolve their conflicts without eliminating their differences or each other. Still, faced with the challenges presented by the New Public, serious discussion of public life must reassess the theory and practice of public discourse. Even when the terms of discourse are dominated by professional specialists,

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Rhetoric and the integration of society

these specialists do not then constitute the public. The public still includes both the influential and the influenced, but by weakening trust in *influence*, professional domination alters the organization of social life by undermining the ties between citizens and the connections between citizens and their leaders.

The aim of this book is to trace the origins and development of the New Public and to diagnose its social consequences in the context of a theory of democratic influence. I will look to the roots of the New Public in the classical liberal public, which I view as a key factor in the emergence of modernity, particularly the rise of modern solidarity. Placing the New Public in these theoretical and historical contexts brings two competing views of the contemporary public arena to the fore. One view, illustrated by Habermas' call for a new ethics of discourse, derides late twentieth-century public life as utterly at odds with the classical ideals of public discussion. The other, more forgiving approach accepts less than fully rational debate as inescapable. Abbreviated discussion is a necessary element in the organization of the systematic influence by which the public will is created. This approach is illustrated by the systems theory of Talcott Parsons. I then propose to bridge Habermasian conceptions of pure *discourse* and Parsonian conceptions of *systematic influence* by arguing that while economies of time and effort do require abridged, token arguments, systems of influence cannot be stable unless citizens can effectively insist on straightforward defense and amplification of token rhetorical claims in two-side public forums. Indeed, the key failure of the New Public as we know it is the lack of such forums. Public leaders employ rhetorical techniques that discourage two-sided dialogue and do what they can to avoid challenges in open forums.

The concerns expressed in this book are not new. They stem from a number of independent but related themes that began to move to the foreground of social and political analysis in the middle of this century. As early as the 1920s, John Dewey, in *The Public and its Problems* (1927, 142), complained that the modern "Great Society" has destroyed the small communities of former times without replacing them with a "Great Community." Hence, the public is in eclipse and will remain so until this larger community is rebuilt through communication of "the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible." For Dewey, shared experience is the *sine qua non* of public deliberation, for only the actual cooperative experience of the whole community allows a group to come to self knowledge and self governance. Party machinery, expert bureaucracy, and anonymous social relations do not allow authentic communication, nor can people identify with specific issues outside of their

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

relations within communities. In short, modern society provides no social foundation for public life.

Distress about the specific impact of the professionalization of communication management in American public life emerged in the late 1950s. Stanley Kelley's *Professional Public Relations and Public Power* (1956) sounded an early warning about the growing use of consultants with backgrounds in public relations and advertising to prominent positions in campaign management. In 1956, Kelley could not foresee the extraordinary growth of specialized and variegated forms of political and public relations consulting. At that time, generic public relations and advertising experts were just beginning to turn their attention to new styles of campaign design based on the use of television, but Kelley believed that this trend might well presage a separation of the actual process of government from political life as carried out in manipulated electoral contests.

Early criticism of the New Public was not limited to Americans writing about developments in the United States. Habermas' first major publication, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (originally published in Germany in 1962) included an interpretation of national elections in the late 1950s in both Germany and the United States. Habermas saw elections in the new mass public as dramatized spectacles designed to stage a (non)public image of consent, spectacles far removed from the authentic public dialogue that the nascent public sphere had produced in eighteenth-century Britain. In contrast, Parsons (1966, 1967) was persistently more optimistic about the capacity of modern societies to meet the challenge of social integration. He argued that the modern public remains at the center of a specialized system of social integration. Organized as a "societal community," modern integrative systems are separate, differentiated institutional spheres comparable to the economy and the political system, but integrated by social influence rather than by money or power. Opinion is organized through *social* processes of association and debate. When aggregated as demands for appropriate social policies, public opinion can provide integrative resources to regulate the conflict and competition that drive political and economic life.

Since 1980, a number of scholars and journalists have examined particular aspects of the New Public in the United States. To cite a few prominent examples, Sabato (1981) and Luntz (1988) have chronicled the rise of political consultants; Blumenthal, in *The Permanent Campaign* (1980) reports that modern techniques of campaigning have come to affect the means of governance; and Ricci (1993) has provided a remarkable account of the impact of new political trends, including the politicization of think tanks, on the proliferation of intensely partisan special interests.

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Rhetoric and the integration of society

Social influence and social integration

Influence and rhetoric. Arguments about the efficacy of the public turn on the question of whether public discussion is sufficiently independent of other strong forces – most notably power and wealth – to constitute a guiding integrative force in its own right. Accordingly, debates about the integration of democratic society inevitably lead to questions about persuasion, its nature, its role in society, and its relation to the basic distinction between reason and coercion. Democratic theory presumes that questions of public policy should be resolved by mutual persuasion rather than by force. In the good society, free citizens *influence* each other by persuasive argument. This conception of social life affirms *rhetorical* ideals, so differences of opinion as to whether there is an “integrative system” easily become disputes about whether supposedly free and rational discussion is, in fact, polluted by latent coercive forces, disguised by misleading rhetoric. Such arguments are often murky because of the ambiguous theoretical status of rhetoric as the means by which influence is exercised.

“Influence,” in this context, refers to affecting the actions of others by means of persuasion. Persuasion may or may not be fully rational, but the term “influence” clearly excludes coercion by threat and inducement by payment; its resources are social. This usage comports with a common dictionary definition of influence as “power to sway based on prestige, ability, wealth, or position.”¹ Unfortunately, this standard definition is silent on the matter of argument. Does influence imply presentation of some sort of argument? Yes, for how else can the resources behind its “sway” be conveyed to an audience? Perhaps mere gesture, appearance, uniform, or demeanor are the limiting cases of “argument.” They are oblique rhetorical references to arguments that *could* be made. When a physician’s white coat and professional manner suggest that expertise is behind the coat and objectivity and trustworthy concern is behind the manner, patients believe that, if necessary, compelling reasons could be advanced for diagnoses and prescriptions. We can speak, then, of the *rhetoric* of white coats as *tokens* of argument. If persuasion does not include argument, however slight, it is hard to see how influence can be distinguished from power or force. Influence invariably employs rhetoric in order to present its aims and to support those aims with reasons, however poor or sketchy. The study of influence is therefore unavoidably tied to concepts of rhetoric.

Influence, in turn, derives its crucial role in sociological theory from the support it provides to processes of social integration. Integration involves resolving conflict, coordinating cooperation, suspending self interest, and promoting cohesion and loyalty. None of these dimensions of order can be

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

achieved by strict adherence to detailed rules established in advance, nor can such rules be fully enforced by even the most strict surveillance and discipline. Even markets, for all their flexible capacity to bring together willing buyers and sellers, require an infrastructure of both facilitating rules and networks of loyalty and trust between long-term trading partners. Sustaining and drawing upon these underlying supports requires the nudges and reminders, displays of good faith, and acts of persuasion that we call *influence*. In daily activity and in the larger affairs of community and state, social life is ordered by a process of addressing people and talking them into accepting and believing and doing. When such talk is a matter of obtaining consent and not a matter of issuing binding commands backed by force, it is called influence.

Differentiation and integration. In asking whether public discussion could provide a control center for society, we reenter a conversation inaugurated by Emile Durkheim, whose search for the sources of “organic solidarity” continues to animate contemporary discussion of the public sphere (1933 [1893]). Challenges to integration come in many forms: inequality between classes or status groups produces latent or manifest conflict; cultural differences and intergroup hatred undermine the cohesion of the larger society; failures to coordinate complexity generate confusion and failures of mutual expectations, which include experiences as varied and discouraging as economic failure (e.g. unemployment), bureaucratic frustration, and loss of faith in society’s capacity to provide security, guidance, and meaning. Cross cutting these and other integrative problems is the generic challenge of role differentiation – the intense division of labor – which becomes elaborate and intricate in modern societies. How, Durkheim asked, can a society organized around narrowly circumscribed occupational roles achieve solidarity? When society was more homogeneous, its integration could be attributed to likemindedness – common consciousness that guaranteed action in unison and solidarity across the whole group. Arguing that this linkage was like the direct connections between molecules, he called premodern solidarity “mechanical.” Solidarity in a modern society requires coordination of differentiated activity, which is more like the integration of functionally differentiated parts of organisms. Hence the notion of “organic solidarity” entered sociological discourse as a term for the special forms of integration that replace the normative unification of traditional society.²

Durkheim believed that mutual recognition of interdependence would be as fecund a well-spring of solidarity as recognition of similitude. Organic solidarity should emerge naturally among interdependent contributors to common work, whose intense interaction would reveal their

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Rhetoric and the integration of society

profound dependence on networks of social relations and give rise to a cooperative type of regulative norms. Durkheim eventually set aside his initial concept of organic solidarity (Lukes 1973, 166–7; Pope and Johnson 1983). A theory of role differentiation cannot fully explain integrative problems located in groups and institutions. Analysis of modern society as a system of occupational roles must clearly place these roles within a larger structure of group interests and conflicts stemming from class divisions, cultural diversity, regional differences, and the interests of the state. The many levels of organization between occupation and society cannot be slighted.

The concept of differentiation applies not only to roles but to institutions and to sectors of society comprised of clusters of related institutions. Banking, for example is a differentiated institution within the economy and legislatures are differentiated institutions within the polity. If the economy and the polity are fully differentiated, well-integrated, boundary-maintaining packages of institutions, they can be called *subsystems* of a larger society, and particular functions can be attributed to them. This is the theoretical strategy employed by Parsons' system-theory of society. He applies the theory of differentiation embodied in the notion of the division of labor to the division of functions between subsystems of society.

According to Parsons, specialization allows for emancipation of effort from ascription to subsidiary needs. Differentiation, whether of roles or of institutions or of subsystems, enhances the capacity of societies to perform the varied functions essential to collective life, functions with different imperatives requiring different modes of organization. Ongoing social life involves radically different functions: production and allocation of resources; organizing and controlling power in the interest of achieving collective goals; coordinating the activities of varied groups and individuals with diverse, sometimes conflicting, interests and aims; reproducing culture and socializing the members of society to common values, social motives, and group loyalties. In traditional societies these functions are fused and generally ascribed to kinship. In the process of modernization, new structures break free of the matrix of kin and clan, and the members of society are free to assume specialized roles within institutions adapted to the exigencies of performing specialized functions – market economies and states, for example (Parsons 1961; 1966; Mayhew 1968; Alexander 1990). In Parsons' view, the same logic applies to *integrative* functions. Modern societies include a complex of integrative institutions, comparable to the economy or the polity, which function together as a differentiated integrative system.

Cambridge University Press

0521481465 - The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence

Leon H. Mayhew

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The components of a differentiated integrative system include, for example, an independent legal system. Since normative order is one focus of social integration, a complex of specialized institutions devoted to interpreting and applying legal norms in a manner relatively free of political domination, and offering access and protection to a wide range of individuals and interests, can legitimately be regarded as a differentiated system with integrative functions. The work of the legal system is performed through an organized set of occupational roles within or connected to the legal profession, and the system is set apart from the larger system of roles and institutions in society by norms protecting the independence of courts and the legal profession. Institutional constraints, ranging from regulation of professional practice by bar associations, accreditation of law schools, and the status of attorneys as “officers of the court” to appellate review and constitutional law, help to insulate the legal system from direct political control or domination by economic interests, allowing the articulation of a legal process of normative interpretation within a social world of ongoing competition and conflict. The process of advising clients, writing legal documents, trying cases, and engaging in legal inquiry employs legal rhetoric to persuade people to pursue their interests within the flexible framework of a legal order. To the extent that this somewhat idealized picture of the legal system is accurate, it depicts a differentiated institutional sphere, a sector sufficiently insulated to be regarded as independent. According to Parsons, a social system functions more effectively when it has a differentiated legal system, because it is then organized to deal with integrative problems in their own terms, unencumbered by constraining responsibilities for making decisions that will also sustain wealth and power (Parsons 1977a, b).³

Not all observers take such an optimistic view of the possibilities of modernity. Critics assert that the notion that integrative institutions are differentiated in the sense that they overcome economic and political forces to create stable social integration is illusory; there are no effective controls on power and money and their destructive effects. Class conflict and the bureaucratic state are not overcome by a normative order, legal or otherwise. Nor is injustice, the ultimate obstacle to true social integration, removed by so-called integrative institutions.

While most observers would concede that the legal systems of many Western democracies enjoy a measure of independence and contribute to social integration, drawing a parallel between legal systems and the organized public is considerably more problematic. Public communication involves many specialized occupations, but the public lacks roles that are professionalized along the lines of law, medicine, or science. Nor does the