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

Leon H. Mayhew

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Professional specialists, using market research and promotional campaigns, have come to dominate public communication. The modern public of the Enlightenment, based on free discussion, has, in Leon Mayhew's terms, been replaced by a "New Public," subject to mass persuasion through systematic advertising, lobbying, and other forms of media manipulation. Professor Mayhew examines this sociological development in terms of discourse and social influence, offering an original theory which bridges Talcott Parsons and Jürgen Habermas. Most importantly, he shows how the rhetorical techniques of the professional communicators are designed to avoid having to defend their claims, thereby precluding meaningful discussion of public issues. As a result, institutions providing forums for good-faith, two-way discourse no longer exist, community through communication cannot be achieved, and the social order is unstable.

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*Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of California, Davis*



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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, United Kingdom  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1997

Typeset in 10/12½ Monotype Times

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Mayhew, Leon H.

The new public: professional communication and the means of social influence / Leon H. Mayhew.

p. cm. – (Cambridge cultural social studies)

ISBN 0 521 48146 5 (hb). – ISBN 0 521 48493 6 (pb).

1. Public relations. 2. Communication – Social aspects.

3. Influence (Psychology) 4. Manipulative behavior. 5. Persuasion (Psychology) I. Title. II. Series.

HM263.M3124 1997

659.2–dc21 96–49355 CIP

ISBN 0 521 48146 5 hardback

ISBN 0 521 48493 6 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

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## Preface

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*The New Public* began to take shape in 1988, when, faced with several months of bed rest, I entertained myself by watching the American electoral campaign on television. In the course of watching and reading about the campaign, I became convinced that one element of sociologists' longstanding response to the radical critique of mass society requires substantial revision. Critics of the notion of mass society assert that the mass public is not so vulnerable to manipulation by elites as might be imagined. Messages of elite communicators can be rejected or reinterpreted by the public as its members pass their views from one member to another within their private groups and circles. The "two-step flow of communication" is still present and can thwart the intentions of influential spokespeople, but what about the reverse flow of communication from the public to its leaders? Are the views of the public transmitted along comparable lines of social organization? I contend that the rationalization of public persuasion and its consequent domination by professional communicators erodes the social organization of public opinion. Rationalized techniques employed in systematic campaigns rely on market research to learn what the public believes and wants, or what is likely to prove persuasive. In consequence, public opinion loses its social moorings; it becomes less organized by social groups that create and transmit public views and more affected by what market research determines to be hot-button appeals.

An initial attempt to explore these ideas appeared in my 1992 essay, "Political Rhetoric and the Contemporary Public." Jeffrey Alexander's welcome invitation to submit a contribution to the Cambridge Cultural Social Studies series allowed me to expand this thesis by examining the rationalization of rhetorical means in the light of theories of social influence and discourse, especially the ideas of Talcott Parsons and Jürgen

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Habermas. Their fertile insights allowed me to see the New Public as generating either *inflated influence* or *unredeemed discourse*. These two concepts, though born of very different conceptual schemes, are closely related, so much so that Parsons' concept of influence as a generalized medium, roundly criticized by Habermas, can be revised to build a useful bridge between structural and critical sociology.

Jeffrey Alexander is well aware of his contribution to this project. I deeply appreciate his wise assistance. Others may not know how much they have affected my work. I learned Parsonian sociology directly from the late Talcott Parsons, but Jürgen Habermas' thought was introduced to me later, during a sabbatical quarter in Berkeley in the spring of 1983. I place Jean Cohen, who first taught me about Habermas, at the head of the list of those whose contributions to my education made this book possible, but who might well issue modest disclaimers in response to any expression of gratitude on my part. Perhaps she will think that I still do not have it quite right, but if I do not, the fault is mine, not hers. In any event, she had more influence than she realized.

Other gracious individuals have helped me more than they know. Both academic colleagues and professional practitioners have illuminated my project with suggestions, leads, caveats, ideas, information, and ephemeral printed material. In this respect, I especially thank Don Abbott, Fred Block, Beth Capell, Greg Clark, Wally Clinton, Glenn Cowan, Clay Chandler, Bruce Hackett, Robert Jackman, David Jacobson, John Lofland, Charles Lacey, Frank Mankiewicz, Thomas Mann, Roland Marchand, Michele McCormick, Mark Melman, John Roemer, John Finley Scott, Gary Segura, Richard Sinopoli, Andrew Skalaban, Roger Strauss, Wilson Smith, Michael Sununu, and John Vohs. Bruce Jentelson, Director of the Washington Center of the University of California, Davis, deserves a special place among this group. He and the staff of the Center made my stay in Washington both pleasant and productive.

I am grateful to UC Davis for making this project possible. A grant from the campus administration greatly facilitated my work, and, as always, the proficient and generous staff of the Shields Library assisted me every step of the way.

Finally, I am grateful for my family's support. Families are often thanked primarily for their patience. In my case, family contributions were active and substantive. My sons, Jonathan Mayhew and Stewart Mayhew, provided challenging ideas and advice, often from opposite sides of the great divides of contemporary political and intellectual thought. Her proximity to New York City allowed my daughter Deborah Mayhew to make valuable



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inquiries on my behalf. My wife Janet helped me in more ways than I can possibly list, ranging from accomplishing tasks that I cannot easily manage, through innumerable corrections of the manuscript, but most of all through her unfailing support.