Pre-conference: Is there still a crisis of public communication? A tribute to Jay Blumler

Sponsoring Divisions: Political Communication, Global Communication and Social Change

(with further support from University of Zurich and University of Leeds)

Format: Preconference; Half day

Date: Wednesday, May 25, 2022

Location: Paris Institute of Political Studies (Sciences Po Paris)

Time: 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM

Former ICA President Professor Jay G. Blumler was instrumental in establishing political communication as a recognised academic field in Britain in the 1960s, and his writing spanned Global Communication and Political Communication. His pioneering work with Denis McQuail, in which they applied uses and gratifications theory to understand how voters responded to television election coverage injected a degree of methodological rigour and normative insight to the study of political communication that characterised his many subsequent books and articles. Jay continued to lecture and publish until shortly before his death in 2021.

In 1995 Blumler and Gurevitch described a ‘crisis of Public Communication’. This comprised six main components:

i) a degree of de-politicisation, due to the centre-stage movement of politically independent media into the political process, encouraging an incursion of media personalities into politics;

ii) dissemination of an over-supply of oxygen for cynicism;

iii) projection of a highly pejorative, over-simplified and in many cases probably unfair stereotype of the standard politician as someone who cares only for power and personal advancement;

iv) that less and less of the political communication diet serves the citizen role—due to a predominant presentation of politics as a game (at the expense of coverage of policy issues) and the provision of ever-shorter soundbites;

v) the catapulting of the press into a position of surrogate opposition, imbuing much reporting with qualities of challenge, criticism and exposure at the expense of giving credit where it is due;

vi) the emergence of a “chronic state of partial war” between politicians and journalists.

In celebration of Jay’s remarkable intellectual legacy the ICA divisions of Political Communication and Global Communication and Social Change invite colleagues from around the world to address the question, *Is there still a crisis of public communication?* This preconference was conceived to offer answers from a range of perspectives and spaces.

Established scholars whose work has engaged with Blumler’s scholarship are invited to provide research-driven reflections upon the pre-conference theme, with particular attention to the following sub themes:

*The condition of the democratic public sphere*

Blumler’s starkly-stated critique was that ‘communications as presently organised is sucking both the substance and the spirit out of the politics it projects’. For him, this amounted to a systemically-rooted crisis of democratic citizenship. We invite contributors to discuss the extent to which the concept of ‘crisis’ describes the current condition of the public sphere; whether we might now be in what Philip Schlesinger has called a ‘post-public sphere’; and what, if anything, might be done to address the normative shortcomings of the empirical public sphere.
The condition of public service broadcasting*

Blumler looked to public service broadcasting to offer an alternative to the most egregious failings of the commercial mass media. He argued that ‘For all of its weaknesses as an institutional model, the BBC’s embeddedness within values of public service has led to profoundly civilizing consequences’. However, he went on to catalogue and critique the ‘gradual dilution of the civic mission of the public service broadcaster’. We invite contributors to consider whether the PSB model can help to revitalise democratic citizenship. If it can, what form should that model now take? If not, what is the alternative to the principles of PSB?

The role of social media*

Blumler described social media as possessing a ‘vulnerable potential’ to improve public communication – and went on to outline a strategy for making this happen. We invite contributors to explore that potential as well as its manifest vulnerability. We are equally interested in contributions from those wishing to argue that the maturation of ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff 2019) and ‘datafication’ (Meijas and Couldry, 2019) are fundamentally altering what constitutes public communication.

Two types of in-person participation are invited:

Prospective ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS should submit an abstract of up to 500 words elaborating their perspective. Submissions will be selected by the conference committee on the basis of originality and relevance to the conference theme, and to ensure a diversity of viewpoints and geographic origins. Up to nine roundtable participants will be selected, and will each be given 5 minutes at the start of the roundtable to outline their perspective.

PhD researchers and early career scholars will be invited to submit an abstract of up to 500 words for a POSTER PRESENTATION addressing the preconference theme through original theory and research. Up to 15 poster presenters will be selected and will be matched with an experienced scholar participating in the event for one to one discussion of their project.

Abstracts, indicating which type of participation is requested (roundtable or poster), should be emailed to the organisers at blumlerpreconf@gmail.com. The deadline for receipt of abstracts is 31 January, 2022. Accepted participants will be notified by 28 February 2022.

Selected poster presenters will be expected to provide a paper of up to 4000 words by April 29, 2022. A prize will be awarded for the best paper as determined by the organising committee.

Two travel bursaries of up to UK £200 will be available to qualifying participants from outside of (World Bank defined) high-income countries. These are sponsored by the University of Leeds School of Media and Communication. Details of how to apply for a travel bursary will be provided to accepted poster presenters upon notification of acceptance of their paper. Bursary recipients will have their registration fee for the preconference waived.

Provisionally, all presentations will be considered for inclusion in a special issue of a leading journal in the field.

Registration will be via the ICA website and will open in March 2022. Non-participating delegates will be accepted within the capacity limitations of the venue. A nominal fee for registration is anticipated and will be announced at the ICA website. We anticipate providing a recording of the roundtable discussion for later viewing online.

Organisers:
Stephen Coleman, University of Leeds
Frank Esser, University of Zurich
Julie Firmstone, University of Leeds
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Cited: