

Apprehending public relations as a promotional industry

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Melissa Aronczyk

Rutgers University, USA

Lee Edwards

University of Leeds, UK

Anu Kantola

University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

This special issue examines the growing social and political importance of promotional activities and public relations. For decades, promotional tools have been deployed to foster the aims of various societal agencies, be they corporations, political actors, public institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or citizen movements. In today's turbulent political and media environments, promotional practices have become more inventive, coordinated and ubiquitous, crossing transnational borders and circulating across business, politics and social institutions. Public relations is an essential tool in the promotional mix and is increasingly a stand-alone strategy for organisations of all kinds to manage their visibility, legitimacy and relationships with stakeholders. However, its influence and power in the context of an increasingly promotional culture are under-researched. In this introduction, we set out the landscape of promotional culture in which public relations activity takes place and consider how existing research on promotional work may illuminate our knowledge of contemporary public relations work.

Keywords

Affective communication, cultural intermediaries, promotional culture, promotional industries, public relations

Corresponding author:

Lee Edwards, University of Leeds, Clothworkers' Building North, Leeds, West Yorkshire LS2 9JT, UK.
Email: l.m.s.edwards@leeds.ac.uk

This special issue comes out of a pre-conference for the International Communication Association annual meeting in June 2016. The aim of the pre-conference, and of this special issue, is to place promotional practices in political, economic and/or social context; to consider how promotion intervenes into and influences constellations of power; and to reflect on the role of public relations (PR) and promotion in spheres of civic life. Our aim was to assess the circulation of promotional and PR practices in terms of communicative power – who gets what, by what means and with what kinds of consequences. In this editorial, we consider the scholarly landscape that frames investigations of PR as/and promotion. We set the scene for the three papers that follow, each of which focuses in novel ways on the societal and political significance of promotional activities, and of PR in particular, as used both alongside and independently of other promotional techniques.

The context: Contemporary promotional cultures

Promotion responds to, and emerges from, the political, economic, social and cultural order of the times. It has played a fundamental role in our history, and contributes to the possibilities of our present and future lives. Promotional techniques are used to sell things, ideas and ways of life that are deemed necessary for audiences to adhere to by corporates, governments and other organisations. From this perspective, promotion is not only an act of exchange, it is – and has long been – a socio-cultural intervention in our daily lives (Wernick, 1991).

Histories of promotional industries demonstrate that promotion is deeply entwined with complex changes in social, economic and political circumstances, in media systems and in cultural beliefs and norms (Ewen, 1996; Jackall and Hirota, 2000; Lears and Jackson, 1994; L'Etang, 2004; McClintock, 1995; Schudson, 1993). Today, as neoliberal tenets of marketisation, consumption and individualism have become more widespread, the need to persuade audiences of making the 'right' political, economic and social choices has increased the demand for promotion on the part of producers, and generated new ways to link producers and consumers. The recent rise of promotional practices is connected to wider societal changes linked to the post-industrial, digital and globalised age – an age that is in many ways more volatile and liquid (Bauman, 2013) than the industrial age of the late 20th century. The result is a broader landscape on which promotional activities take place, along with a routinisation of promotional practices and expectations in everyday functions.

Promotion is now an institutionalised form of governance for organisations, a matter of course not only in the for-profit sector but also for organisations operating in the political sphere (political parties, activist groups, local and national government), in the public sector (education, health care) and in the third sector (charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), activist groups) (Pallas et al., 2016; Strömbäck, 2008; Strömbäck and Kiouisis, 2011). Organisations – corporations, political parties or NGOs – have historically built characteristically hierarchical bureaucracies providing relatively stable identities and public images. Now, with digitalisation and globalisation, organisations have increasingly turned flat and flexible and face a more turbulent world. Societal classes, customer segments and forms of civic engagement are in flux.

This leads to promotional work and practices that target an increasingly volatile audience to create a favourable appearance in the eyes of their floating citizens, voters, members, supporters, customers, employees, unions, suppliers, distributors and financiers. Businesses, governments, public institutions, NGOs and nations are continuously restructuring and reinventing their identities, images, reputation and brands, which are created to gain and sustain legitimacy in the midst of continuous fluctuation. This promotional work is clearly more communicative, performative and affective than in industrial bureaucracies. For instance, corporate and political leaders used to reside at the top of the pyramid and wield power through formal hierarchies and chains of command. In flexible organisations, they need to borrow tactics reminiscent of celebrity promotion and engage in promotional labour and drama in order to become the symbolic core of the dispersed organisation and promote themselves as authentic and intimate (Kantola, 2014b).

The extension of promotion into new domains influences the ways we receive, understand, interpret and respond to information about organisations across many spheres of activity, and shapes our sense of identity and place in society. Promotion and consumption are no longer instrumental acts; they have become embedded in the ways organisations conduct their business, individuals live their lives and communities construct their relationships. The terms ‘promotional culture’ (Davis, 2013), ‘consumer culture’ (Featherstone, 1991) and ‘commodity culture’ (Nixon, 2003) not only describe different aspects of this environment but also reflect the complexity of the phenomena: promotional logic affects individuals as well as organisations; organisations as well as individuals are consumers of goods and services; and commodification extends well beyond products and services, to the values, beliefs and attitudes that define our ways of life (Jackall and Hirota, 2000).

Promotional culture: Pros and cons

A positive view of promotional culture is that promotional industries have helped to develop healthy markets and economies by facilitating the movements of goods and services and monitoring consumer ‘needs’, thereby increasing economic growth, individual wealth and social development (Davis, 2013). Promotional industries also support healthy government by providing a channel for (two-way) communication between citizens and politicians, helping to integrate public opinion into the policy formation process (Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011) and providing tools through which activists can make their voices heard (Coombs and Holladay, 2012; Curtin, 2016; Demetrious, 2013). More broadly, by creating connections between audiences and organisations and building communities of common interest, Sommerfeldt (2013) and Taylor (2010) suggest that promotional work has the potential to generate the kind of social capital that forms the basis of a healthy public sphere. Promotion can also help sustain a financially viable, independent media by providing funds and information that reduce the reliance of news outlets on the state. Moreover, the expansion of markets and the international spread of capitalism have offered a mechanism through which promotion can support what some have called ‘consumer citizenship’ (Cohen, 2003) or ‘ethical consumption’ – aligning choices in the marketplace with the exercise of democratic rights.

In this arena, promotional initiatives include consumer boycotts, campaigns to enforce corporate social responsibility and/or forms of ethical consumption (Aronczyk, 2013b; Harrison et al., 2005; Nicholls and Opal, 2005).

On the other hand, such action is also limited by the inequalities inherent in market structures (Barber, 2007) and by the tendency for capitalism itself to co-opt critique in order to ensure its own survival (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Corporations have instrumentalised protest and social action by transforming them into marketable commodities and an opportunity for ethical consumption. When protest is constructed as part of a corporate brand – as in the case of the Body Shop, Lush and others – its political significance is reduced (Aronczyk, 2013b; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). Individualised consumer activism cannot replace collective action outside the market; on the contrary, it places the market at the centre of politics and civil society, rather than serving to protect the political sphere from the influence of commerce and private interests. As Aronczyk (2013b) notes,

When corporations act like social movements or non-governmental organizations, taking political stances on issues of global social and environmental concern, appealing to consumers via the ethical or moral rightness of an issue, the notions typically associated with these forms of collective action – protest, activism, resistance, radical politics, struggle – are made flexible, weak and contingent. (p. 2)

Critics of the promotional industries point out that they can only ever serve their paymasters, usually governments and corporations; that they use unethical persuasive techniques, including telling lies and partial truths; and that they manipulate the public for dubious ends (Mickey, 2002; Miller and Dinan, 2007; Moloney, 2006). Davis (2013) uses the term ‘mediatised capitalist democracy’ to indicate the ways in which promotion directs behaviour towards servicing markets and individual values rather than to collective welfare or communal values, with important social consequences. From a governmental perspective, for example, communicating to the public about political parties, policies and decisions has become more important as democracies have matured and citizens have become more cynical. But political marketers often treat the world of politics as a marketplace, where attracting voters’ attention and support is achieved through ‘selling’ political ideas (Henneberg et al., 2009). Frequently, promotional work begins with monitoring and accommodating voters’ needs to influence policy formation, rather than simply being about policy dissemination, and the results are fed through to the policymaking process, reversing the traditional view of politicians making policy and then disseminating their decisions to the public after the fact (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011). Among elites, promotion can facilitate secrecy rather than openness. It can lead them to focus on serving hidden interests and winning power, rather than managing their influence in the public interest. Promotion is also divisive since it tends to target only audiences who are likely to respond: poor, marginalised and undocumented groups are far less likely to offer any kind of value for promoters, and their interests and needs are ignored unless they are instrumental to a particular objective (Ewen, 1976; Marchand, 1998; Munshi and Kurian, 2005).¹

The prevalence of promotional *culture* now means that audiences themselves use promotional techniques for their own identity and image management. Organisations today address a 'knowing' audience, which demands authentic rather than instrumental communication. Consequently, promotional work is couched in terms of building relationships or encouraging engagement and dialogue rather than selling or persuading and of maintaining respect for audiences rather than addressing them as a means of achieving organisational goals (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Powell, 2013). However, claims that promotion equates to relationship-building are countered by the fact that organisation–public relationships are more performance than practice, with precious little dialogue and listening going on (Willis, 2014). Manipulating the news agenda is part of this process: scholars have shown how, for over a century, the relationship between promotional industries and news outlets has been used to generate positive editorial content (Ewen, 1996; Franklin et al., 2010; Manning, 2001; Miller, 1999; Turow, 2006). The resulting reduction in the quality of public debate leads to populist, 'common denominator' arguments that cater to social prejudice. At its extreme, news content is 'spoiled' by the ascendance of so-called fake news, which damages news quality both in actuality and as epithet.

The long and documented history of unethical techniques that have used ideas from mass psychology to play on emotions, prejudices, fears and instincts (Ewen, 1996: 25), as well as the prevalence of audience surveillance and monitoring to develop promotional strategies, means it is difficult to ignore that promotional industries have long acted unprofessionally and against the public interest. Promotion is not a one-way street, however, and it would be wrong to suggest that organisations dictate the ways we live our lives through their use of promotional techniques. Promotional efforts are contested by audiences, who interpret, take up and use promotional messages in ways unanticipated by producers (Featherstone, 1991). History is littered with examples of unsuccessful promotion, either because audiences find ways to avoid it, or because they reinterpret it in ways that subvert the original objective – for example, when logos are altered to highlight corporate corruption rather than the corporate brand. Activists have always used promotional tactics such as advertising, stunts, events, speeches, media relations and direct action to generate support for their mission to counter corporate and political power (Earl and Kimport, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Simon, 2011; Straughan, 2004). Nonetheless, the logic of promotional culture seems to dictate that even when consumers try to resist the imposition of market principles on their lives, they must buy into the same promotional techniques they are resisting in order to publicise their efforts and be effective.

At a societal level, globalised problems such as trade inequalities, environmental degradation, migration and terrorism, none of which national governments can resolve, have created new anxieties over promotional practices. In questions of war and peace, the notion of propaganda is back on the table (Briant, 2014) as there is a new sense of urgency and unrest reminiscent of the Cold War era, spiced with tactics of information warfare and soft power. In the normal run of political events, the penetration of corporate influence into politics is visible via promotional tactics such as lobbying, but it is now also felt in the ways in which the news agenda becomes open to abuse from uncontrolled promotional strategies. In 2016, the distortion of information via networked, influential, but unregulated channels is likely to have had a significant effect on the outcomes of the Brexit referendum in the UK and the US presidential elections. The scale of this influence is only just coming

to light, and raises difficult questions for promotional industries about the degree to which they can claim to serve the public interest when they are simultaneously involved in strategies that limit the space available for adequate and balanced deliberation.

Important debates have also emerged about the effect of PR and promotional strategies on political and civic life in a context of interactive, networked digital media. The ‘abundance, ubiquity, reach and celerity’ (Blumler, 2013) of modern communications practices, technologies and forms of participation have permanently transformed what it means both to conduct politics and to be politically and socially engaged (Powell, 2013). Used in the political process (e.g. tools such as data analytics, citizen mobilisation, voter segmentation and campaign microtargeting), they have transformed political communication into a personalised process. Some argue that they have helped create a digital public sphere (Kreiss, 2012; Wolfson, 2014), allowing for more – and more diversified – participants in political life (Blumler, 2013; Chadwick, 2013). More generally, digital technologies have increased the scope for promotional industries to extend their influence well into the private sphere, creating new modes of connection and community-building between individuals and organisations using global and globalising media technologies. They bypass existing gatekeepers, leveraging the ‘relationships’ that promotional industries claim to own and manage by communicating directly with audiences (Cohen, 2013; Turow, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). However, the hypercommercialisation of online space (Howard, 2006) and the private sponsorship of public participation (Lee et al., 2015; Walker, 2014) can potentially undermine the quality of political discourse and civic engagement. Ultimately, the self-interest driving relationship management by organisations significantly limits the contribution to public life made by promotional work, at the very least making it conditional on some kind of organisational benefit (Davis, 2013).

The advent of online communication as a crucial promotional vehicle has also posed new and significant challenges to the tense relationship between promoters and their audiences. Promotional industries actively manipulate algorithms, technological infrastructure and the conditions for user engagement (140 characters in a tweet, the capacity to post photographs, video or audio) by, for example, working on search engine optimisation techniques, using ‘big data’ to target individuals and groups with tailored messages and using cookies to track audience activity and target marketing appropriately (Kennedy, 2016). They also instrumentalise and monetise our desire to engage and connect with others: word-of-mouth recommendations have long been a desirable promotional tool, and this has transformed online into a search for content that will ‘go viral’, where audiences themselves do the promotional leg-work by sharing videos, articles or other content (Terranova, 2000). Our endorsement of the content makes meaning travel further (and arguably, makes the message more powerful). Sharing and sociability are instrumentalised, not only through these kinds of ‘appealing’ promotion (Demetrius, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013) but also by making our ability to share *conditional on* promotion: free sites have advertising, if you don’t want promotion, then you have to pay.

PR: A core (but neglected) promotional industry

Despite its centrality to the processes and effects of promotional culture described above, PR is an under-researched area of promotional work – particularly as compared to the

two other key promotional industries, advertising and branding. Advertising has historically attracted most attention from scholars for its influence as a promotional industry, perhaps because of its overt approach to persuasion and manipulation, and its visibility in our lives as consumers. Alongside products and services, it is well-documented that advertisers have sold wars, ways of life, political arguments and cultural norms, sometimes with the explicit but underlying objective of ensuring the survival of capitalism (and therefore its own occupational future) (Schudson, 1993). Advertising is ubiquitous, inserting itself into spaces and screens, programmes and publications, online and offline channels, as advertisers search for new ways to ensure audiences engage with the material they produce and try to combat technologies that continually offer new routes for bypassing marketing and promotion material.

Branding has also been subject to scrutiny in its capacity as an essentially rhetorical strategy that provides ‘a platform for the patterning of activity, a mode of organising activities in time and space’ (Lury, 2004: 1). Brands frame the relationships between individuals, and between individuals and organisations, and so have less to do with an actual product than with the social possibilities that the product offers, the ways of being that are realised through consumption of the brand in its material and immaterial forms (Lury, 2004). Again, the visibility of brands and branding strategies may underlie the scholarly attention that they have merited. Brands are talked about, the associations constructed through them circulate through self-reflexive discourse – and branding thereby instrumentalises audiences’ sociability and loyalty. Brands are also mobile – they transcend specific objects and so travel across time and space, fitting neatly into the deterritorialised nature of globalised markets and encroaching on private and public spaces in ways that normalise promotional logic in all aspects of our lives (Aronczyk, 2013a; Arvidsson, 2006; Klein, 2000; Moor, 2007).

In contrast, PR has received far less attention for its role as a promotional industry, despite its importance in facilitating the ‘communication and exchange of ideas’ (L’Etang, 2008: 18) between organisations and their audiences to deliver some kind of change. As noted above, organisations of all stripes now actively employ PR and professional campaign practices to advocate for their interests. As a promotional practice, the profession has come into its own as a means of strategically ‘managing’ savvy audiences who ‘read’ promotional texts actively and critically, and engage in promotion themselves. While stunts, events, viral campaigns, media relations and sponsorship all form part of the arsenal of tools that PR practitioners use to create, stimulate and manage communication, contests for power, influence and legitimacy also take place in the context of various forms of ‘relations’ – stakeholder relations, media relations, government relations – that organisations try to manage through PR work.

Research on PR has illuminated how practitioners influence audiences by engaging them through discourses and arguments that form part of ongoing ‘conversations’. The instrumental intent and promotional impact of their activity are thereby masked, at least to some extent, because they are framed in terms of a type of ‘organizational sociability’, where word of mouth and the use of ‘mutual friends’ in the form of influencers (journalists, analysts, vloggers, bloggers, celebrities, chat show hosts) all produce a climate of engagement that is designed to be easy for audiences to accept and participate in. On the other hand, civic movements may employ branding and marketing techniques, which

take into account the anti-promotion sentiment in their audiences. In the Egyptian context, for example, in the time of mass protests in 2010 and 2011, activist administrators marketed their websites by using a positive, inclusive language and informal dialect in their posts and refrained from explicit political activism to make their page as inclusive as possible. They also posed as anonymous as an important strategy to play down any echoes of celebrity and entertainment culture (Poell et al., 2016).

PR is also in the business of *anti*-promotion insofar as its promotional imperative is reputation management, and so there are limits to the kinds of information about a company that it puts up for discussion, despite claims that transparency is desirable (Christensen and Langer, 2009). Keeping information *out of* the public eye can be vital for organisations, and crisis management, with its focus on damage limitation when organisations are under threat, is the epitome of this anti-promotional work. PR is also the only promotional profession that engages in behind the scenes work to coach individuals in appropriate communication styles. As such, it engages with the embodiment of promotion among and by organisational citizens, as well as with the contextualisation of promotional work in the context of audiences' lives. Media training, spokesperson coaching, stakeholder management, audience surveillance and analysis and media monitoring are all used to help ensure the people who speak on behalf of organisations are adequately prepared for a public conversation. The work involved in paving the way for promotion is complemented by practitioners' active management of interactions between organisations and their audiences on an ongoing basis (e.g. as gatekeepers for journalists or a point of contact for the public).

Apprehending PR as a promotional industry

Given these realities of PR work, how, then, do we engage with PR's role as a promotional industry in contemporary societies? We propose four aspects of PR work that are central to the manifestation and management of its identity as a promotional industry.

Promotional strategies, PR and political engagement

Political marketing scholarship proposes that marketing literacy allows political decision-makers to form stronger ties to their publics in the pursuit of participatory or collaborative models of decision-making, transparency and accountability (e.g. Henneberg et al., 2009; Lees-Marshment, 2011; Scammell, 2014). Negative assessments of professionalised political communication, however, focus on its tendency to embrace short-term results and populism and to transform political communication into a rationalised, manipulative force that denigrates the quality and character of political discourse and leads to narrowcasting, 'hyperpluralism' (Mayhew, 1997) and fragmentation, separating electoral politics from governance and excluding citizens from public debate (Bennett and Manheim, 2001; Hamelink, 2007). To complicate this polarised debate, it is necessary to consider the complexities of promotional strategies and PR work in the context of politics and civil society, addressing the tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions inherent to PR as a source of both possibilities and pitfalls in political engagement. Garland's contribution to this Special Issue reveals one important contradiction: although

PR has been normalised in UK government communications, government press officers and journalists struggle to navigate between the need for information provision to citizens and the promotional demands of ministers in their own power negotiations.

Affective power in promotional culture and media

Affective and emotional rhetorics have always been a part of the PR arsenal, alongside rational discourse, because of their persuasive power. But in today's context of media and politics, the focus on emotion and affect is paramount. From language games to sentiment analysis, from government metrics for wellbeing (Davies, 2015) to 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015), emotions have become important tools to gain and exert power in political campaigns. But how has the construction of emotion and affect by PR contributed to these and other 'emotional regimes' (Kantola, 2014a; Reddy, 2001) playing into politics for promotional purposes? Here, we suggest it is crucial to consider the importance of contexts for emotional styles of power, such as partisan media (in which 'outrage' is the default emotional register; see Berry and Sobieraj, 2014) or popular culture as a platform for the promotion of politics and politicians. Trevisan's article in this Special Issue provides another approach. In the current British context of austerity and welfare reform, the use of personal life stories by disadvantaged groups as promotional messages can offer powerful counter-narratives of advocacy.

Algorithms and Big Data allow new forms of emotional targeting which rely on personal 'likes' in social media and provide more personalised data compared with more conventional demographic targeting. Political campaigns microtarget recipients in a psychological way by measuring their personality from their digital footprints. Such fine-tuned marketing can deliver massive amounts of messages to small groups via sponsored news-feed-style ads in social media timelines, which can only be seen by users with the targeted profiles. Thus, for instance, both Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum campaign in the same year used less mainstream television, relying more on personalised messages on social media and digital television (Grassegger and Krogerus, 2017). All this poses new challenges for research. We lack knowledge on the actual outcomes of these strategies, as it is only the companies with new methods that provide information on their effectiveness and at the same time promote themselves.

Promotional workers as intermediaries

One reason for the increasing influence of promotion on political and civic life is the cross-fertilisation of PR and promotional techniques across political, economic and social spheres. As practitioners create campaigns that build and manage relationships among a wide variety of organisations and audiences, they mobilise promotional tools and techniques across different spaces and places. However, while normative models exist for PR and public affairs work (Grunig, 1992; Harris and Fleisher, 2005), relatively little is known about actual practice, how it has evolved and how it changes based on various clients, audiences or issues (L'Etang, 2012; L'Etang et al., 2012). We suggest there needs to be more detailed investigation of the

strategies and influence of PR practitioners as promotional intermediaries, rather than organisational functionaries. The focus of such studies would be on meaning-making rather than message delivery, and explore the processes practitioners use to communicate and circulate norms, values, beliefs and practices through their involvement across wide-ranging areas of political, social and cultural life. Fitch's paper offers one example of this kind of work, engaging with PR's cultural intermediary work in the relatively neglected area of celebrity PR. She shows how practitioners bring celebrity into being by constructing personalities, identities and audience communities in their everyday practice. Fitch highlights the ethical challenges that arise in the course of 'successful' celebrity PR that must co-opt audiences and media and stretch the truth in order to achieve its goals.

Civil society and PR

The power of PR also makes itself felt in how it shapes our participation in civil society and engagement in public debates about issues of all kinds. Civil society can be understood as a space that mediates between private and public spheres and where 'individuals and groups are free to form organizations that function independently and that can mediate between citizens and the state' (Downey and Fenton, 2003: 190). Indeed, Taylor and Doerfel (2005) go so far as to argue that '[p]ublic relations, with its ability to create, maintain, and change relationships is at the nexus of civil society development' (p. 122). A number of authors have connected this role with the creation of social capital, or the development of networks between organisations and their audiences that facilitate social cohesion (Ihlen, 2005; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor, 2011; Taylor and Kent, 2014; Verhoeven, 2008). In this context, we suggest that more empirical evidence concerning the role of PR in civil society is required, exploring the different ways it might prompt citizens to engage with (or withdraw from) public debates and community engagement, thereby strengthening, challenging or fragmenting social cohesion. To ensure analyses adequately account for the realities of lived experience, it will be crucial to recognise the similarities and differences in the type and effects of promotional work in civil society across different cultural contexts, as well as in local, national and transnational communities.

In order to assess PR's effects as promotional communication in these (and other) areas, we need to consider the baseline against which promotional communication ought to be measured. For instance, if promotional communication is held up against the standard of normative ideals of democratic deliberation, we may try to evaluate promotional practices like PR in terms of their consideration of pluralism, inclusiveness or commitment to the public interest. To do this, we might look at either the *intention* or the *effect* of such efforts. Some ask whether the nature of the organisation – corporate, governmental, non-governmental – alters the baseline for legitimacy in promotional communication. Still others consider the genre of information being communicated. Some excellent work has recently surfaced, for instance, on emotional styles of power or the mobilisation of so-called affective publics for promotional purposes (Kantola, 2014a; Papacharissi, 2015).

On the other hand, scholars working in a more object-centred, network-minded approach have observed that normative models of deliberation tend to reinforce an opposition between democracy and technology. Some media scholars have lately

attempted to reconcile this opposition by pointing to the *affordances and limitations of specific technologies, media systems and platforms* in communication (Dean, 2010; Galloway, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). This approach is sensitive to the technological mediation of publics and the instruments required for democratic participation, but cannot ignore the thoroughly promotionalised character of so many of these systems and platforms. Strong analyses take into account the many ways that public discourse operates as a promotional device for a host of actors who are not even necessarily participants to the conversation.

Finally, some important work on promotional communication puts front and centre the *neoliberal context* as a source of investigation. This context favours an ideology of participation and consultation while limiting the formats in which participation and consultation can take place (Lee et al., 2015). The ‘new pluralism’ in which everyone seemingly has a voice can sometimes manifest as a shadow concept that masks real and systemic inequalities. Deliberation in this environment can easily slip towards the promotion of individual interests rather than the collective since the collective is written out of neoliberal politics and economics. When promotional cultures do not accommodate promotion of the collective, public good, then the quality, scale and scope of deliberation are endangered (Edwards, 2016).

Conclusion

In thoroughly promotionalised environments, PR seems to be an ideal resource. It is a tool that we understand, expect to see, are suspicious of but also unnerved and judgemental about if it is not used. It is normalised, rather than exceptional, and so its manipulation and persuasion are also normalised and expected. In this sense, PR should be seen in the context of deeper shifts towards communicative power (Castells, 2009; Reichert, 2009) – a form of power which is productive, performative and affective. Communicative power builds consent, suggests, motivates and appeals through symbolic work and increasingly replaces the more traditional disciplinary and coercive tools of power. It creates and sustains cultures, identities, images and symbols in order to hold together increasingly volatile and flexible organisations in corporate and political life. As such, it is not only something to be critical of, but an all-pervading condition for societal life and action that we must understand in greater depth (Seeck and Kantola, 2009).

As we have discussed above, promotional culture has become embedded in our environments as businesses, political and social movements and interest groups try to reach increasingly volatile audiences and stakeholders by using various communicative techniques. Profanity and fluidity are typical for these techniques: they do not stop at normative borders such as the line between PR and politics, or between business and NGOs. Instead, promotional tactics and tools are circulated across societal sectors and walks of life. NGOs employ branding, celebrity tactics and media performances to find supporters, while corporations aim to bond with social movements or create astroturfing front groups. With this *Powers of Promotion* special issue, we suggest that these agile and fluid powers of promotion deserve a fresh look from research, in a way that parallels the innovations we see in practice. This ‘look’ would

follow fluid tactics and decipher their new uses, delivering scholarship that crosses disciplinary boundaries – for example, between studies of PR, political communication, organisational communication and critical cultural and media studies.

To our minds, the notion of promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) captured this new environment, and later work on promotional society has proved that promotion has taken an all-pervading form in current societies (Davis, 2013; MacAllister and West, 2013). Analysing PR as promotion is a fruitful way to conceptualise its role in these contexts and capture wider shifts in the ways power works in liquid societies (Bauman, 2013). Indeed, the rise of polarising figures like Theresa May (UK Prime Minister) and Donald Trump (US President) has led many to question whether PR literacy (Holladay and Coombs, 2013) is sufficient inoculation against the new viral environment of influential discourse. We are currently faced with unprecedented forms of communication management in the Western political sphere. On both sides of the Atlantic, political leaders have thrown the playbook out the window, fostering antagonistic relationships with the very communities that supported their rise. Among the many dangerous potentialities of current political administrations is their disdain for and denigration of the press. Such a stance gives competing promotional narratives even greater pride of place and places the responsibility on the audience to be ‘public relations literate’, to take responsibility for becoming a knowing audience or a knowing consumer. Neoliberalism’s emphasis on individualism, consumption and choice all come together nicely in this obligation, but critical scholarship can unpick its apparent normality, helping to identify where and why developing and applying this kind of knowledge might be problematic for audiences and, correspondingly, where the influence of promotional work may go uncontested.

Such scholarship is needed now, more than ever, to help communities make sense of instrumental uses of power to promote a world in which we do not recognise cherished national or personal values. At the same time, however, with this Special Issue, we suggest that the rise of promotional culture has positive sides. Communicative power signals not only the advent of post-factual politics or the rebirth of propaganda; it is also an elementary part of egalitarian societies, cultures and sentiments, where power is exercised more through words and images than through violence and armies. Therefore, the study of PR as promotion should capture both the positive and negative sides of promotional activities and shed light equally on techniques that hide or distort facts or serve powerful interests, and on techniques that empower and motivate towards meaningful societal action, with more positive outcomes.

Finally, it is clear that promotional activities today have a growing impact on civic and democratic life. However, there is also a pressing need to ‘de-westernise’ promotional scholarship. Western countries are not the sole countries to use forms of promotion. In many other countries, such as in Russia or China as well as in the Global South, promotional communication is used actively in public affairs and political life (Chen and Culbertson, 2003; Hou et al., 2013; Tsetsura, 2011; Tsetsura and Chernov, 2009). Also, promotion is an important element between countries globally (Miskimmon et al., 2014). While they are less widely published, non-Western perspectives on the relationship between PR, politics and power will offer important correctives or corollaries to dominant Western views.

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Note

1. See Tabuchi (2017) for an example of promotional tactics directed specifically at minority groups.

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Author biographies

Melissa Aronczyk is Associate Professor in the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (Oxford, 2013) and the co-editor of *Blowing Up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture* (Peter Lang, 2010).

Lee Edwards is Associate Professor in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. She has published extensively on the way that power operates in and through public relations. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Communication*, *European Journal of Communication*, *Media, Culture & Society*, *New Media & Society*, *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, and *Cultural Sociology*.

Anu Kantola is Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki. Her work on PR and management consultancies and affective leadership styles appears in academic books and journals including *Media, Culture & Society*; *European Journal of Cultural Studies*; *Nordicom Review*; *Management Learning*; *Journal of Management and Organization*; and *Journal of Political Power*.