

Co-creation of meaning: Strategic communication and the sovereign public

TRANSCRIPT OF THE SPEECH FOR THE
INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE
«COMMUNICATION AS A DISCIPLINE
AND AS A FIELD: SHARING EXPERIENCES
TO CONSTRUCT A DIALOGUE», JULY 9-11, 2015

C. BOTAN

Professor of Communication and
the Director of the Ph.D. program in
Health and Strategic Communication
at George Mason University

First I want to apologize to the audience. As you can see I didn't exactly dress for the academic conference as my suitcase ended up in London or Toronto or somewhere. And I want to start by setting out my goal. And that is like before, due to the experience of most of the folks of this room, in a whole area, that I am not going to try to be an expert in the area, but I want to try to provide some basic ideas, some concepts and even some terms, that I hope we can contribute them to the conference. And I will be happy to hear any questions, and it is perfectly fine to disagree with me or to make fun of me, I will cry a little bit later maybe or I will cry on the way. And what I am going to do is talking about the idea of co-creation of meaning, and what that means in strategic communications, which is my area of work and what I call the sovereign public. And I want to start by looking at this, by the earlier presentation of professor Eadie. But you remember professor Eadie as he talked about the personal model that share its meanings and that constructed by people in the personal model. And essentially, what I am going to do is to talk about the same idea but applying it to the strategic communication. And I'm going to talk about the field of the strategic communication, as well.

So I'm going to do three things today. First, to define what I think the strategic communication is. Then I am going to talk about co-creation of view, actually my new book will be out in the end of 2016. And it is on co-creation of view and strategic communication. So, what I am doing today is just few ideas of the chapter two of my book. And I want to conclude with my third point about sovereign publics and the leading role of publics. My ends, I guess, it is terms of publics, we should start by defining it a little bit. And for me, for today, just for this discussion that what I mean by publics are the groups of people that have a common view and interest on the topic. There are more academic definitions and I spent the whole chapter about what publics are and how they work in my new book. But for a purpose today I can keep if feel eliminate to these groups of people that have a common view interpretation of things and a common set of values about them.

Let me start with the terminology and some of these well established terms in other fields. And let me slightly redefine them for our use and so I am going to start with terms, since we are talking about strategic communications. I will talk about what is strategy and what is grand strategy, tactics and what is the relationship between grand strategy, strategy

and tactics. And I will tell now that probably the most important idea before I will start with three concepts, these three categories are not clearly distinctive categories, they overlap a little bit. The boundaries are not so important and what is much more important is the essence of the categories, the idea of the categories. They flow into each other a little bit and sometimes in practice and even in theory you can't tell what is strategy and grand strategy, but it is not critically important because here's what we are talking about. The term grand strategy is pretty old, we tracing back to the 400 BC. And the term grand strategy really relates to the policy, so the term grand strategy was used in the military science. And we are not doing military science on this conference. I am just using this as an analogy. Grand strategy has to do with policy, so in government and politics grand strategy is a policy level of the government that setting the policy. Things like that, domestic policy is domestic programs, but those are the policies that set up the highest performing level. By analogy, when we are talking about strategic communications in organizations, for example, the analogy is the highest level of organization in the grand strategy, because that is the policy making level. So that might be a CEO, board of directors, whatever it is. And the grand strategy sets the policies and it is basically assign them to the strategic level. Now grand strategy covers the whole organization.

I am talking now about strategic communications. Now we are going to talk about communication function within the organization. And at the level of strategy that is the level of strategic communications, it is the level of campaign planning. This is the level of responsibility for understanding the campaign and the relationships that the organization hopes to affect through the campaign. So strategy is the planning level, it is the campaign level and that is the level of strategic communication level. So we talked about strategic communication. This is the sort of our home, where we live.

Tactics is the application level and that's what we are doing, the actual work, the execution of the campaign plan. So the strategic communicator begins at the level of strategy, planning the campaign and then also may supervise, for example, the execution of that campaign. So both of those are the strategic communications, but the core of strategic communications is planning function, it is the understanding of publics, of relationships and plans and those plans are made up of strategies, so we call them strategic communication. The important thing here is the relationships between three areas: grand strategy, strategy, and tactics. And the authority or power of an organization flows from the top to down.

So the organization sets the policy and then authorizes it or forces of strategic communication campaigns. Those campaigns are subordinated by the organization policy, whether it's national government, company or single corporation. The strategic campaign is subordinated by the policy level of organization. And all of the parts of the campaign should be in a support with the police of organization or whatever it is. And they are shouldn't be strategies on the strategic level, they shouldn't be strategies which are divorced from the policy of an organization. In fact strategy doesn't directly serve the interest of the organization. We will call them often strategies. So often strategies are the strategies that don't serve policy; they consume time and resources but they don't serve policy interest of organization. The campaign plan then specifies the number of duties, responsibilities or tactics and there we get in to the relationship that, I understand this conference focusing on, the relationship between theory and practice, because the campaign is like a mini theory. A campaign has an idea that what we do X we will get Y, it's talking about the earlier speakers did, the relationship between variables. So if we can conduct the campaign in the certain way, so we can get certain results.

And then the tactics are what the campaign implements. Tactics get therefore from the campaign and the support. So all of the tactics, all of the units of work in a strategic communication campaign should support the campaign plan and in term, support the pol-

icy of the organization. And it's tactics that carry out that don't directly support the plan, the strategies of the plan, so I call them often tactics. So often tactics are those, which are following from the language of the school, are not integrated communication. Integrated communication is in part when the policy and the strategy and the tactics work together, working in integrated manner. For the purpose of the campaign of the strategic communications what makes it integrated is when three activities support one another. So, authority flows from the top down. But I use the term reality here and the reality or concreteness if you like flows from the bottom up. The grand strategy, the policy of organization and even the strategies are really just ideas. They exist in peoples' mind or memo, or paper. But they don't have real application until you get to the tactical level.

The tactical level is the units of work. So the campaign strategy gets its reality and gets its concreteness from tactics. Meaning the tactics are equal, coequal with strategy and importance, so the strategies are not particularly important if we don't have tactics to implement them.

Let's focus now on the level that is the home of strategic communication, which is strategic level that what I am going to talk about for about few minutes. So what we are talking at the strategic level is the communication campaign planning. And in the minute I'm going to try to draw from that talk about the kinds of careers that we may want or we get the most paid. In fact the latest data that I have is from United States, I couldn't read Russian data, my apology, but the US government does the good job of keeping trace of paid skills for about almost 300 real specialties within the United States economy and what stands out is that public relations which is the part of strategic communication, public relation managers are today the 17th highest paid profession in the US. 25-30 years ago that wasn't at all true; 50 years ago it wasn't even a little bit true. We were much underpaid. And partly because we were locked on the tactical level, because we hadn't doing strategic planning. And we couldn't explain how what we did tend to the grand strategy of the organization. So what's important on the level of strategy, which links the tactics of strategic communications with the policy of the organization that was missed if you'll go back 30 or 40 years ago, public relations work in the US.

So what we are talking about is not the tactical level and I want to remind you that strategies, sometimes practice, tactics or supervise tactics, there is not complete difference between the strategic level and tactical level. And what I'm basically calling for today is that strategic communication as much as we can, we want to move from the tactical level to the strategic level in term of our training.

Now let's talk briefly about the term of strategic communication that I performing around and you are completely free to disagree but strategic communication for me is the thing that all of these strategic fields have in common, so for me strategic communication is made up of the whole out of fields. They are already established and I want to say later that there's no need for one taking over another. Basically for me the field strategic communication is divided into two big categories.

The first one I call the big three. And what big three are, these are the professional fields of practice and strategy in which the planning of the campaign in the supervision of execution to the campaign is what the field does. So that the field is defined as concerned with the plan of the campaigns in carry on of these campaigns. And there are three large fields of how to do that. The first one is Public Relations which is very big in the United States and that's getting very large in Russia, it's getting very big in China and it's growing very fast in many other places around the world.

The next field that is concerned by putting together the planning of strategic communications and implementing them is the whole area of marketing communication. Marketing communication, and some people call them «marcom», is communication campaign that

goes to put together to promote goods and services. It's often called in business schools, often concerned to be a part of management. But it is also a kind of strategic communication as you can see later.

The third area is that really big and does nothing but communication campaigns, is the whole area of public health communications. And I know that may surprise you a little bit because it's not yet as bigger as other two, but it's much smaller than the first two but it is growing and in fact growing faster than the other two. Strategic public health campaigns are been used all over the world, they were used recently; they are used in every country that I know for public issues as smoking or seat belts or whatever. So these are those characteristic fields in which planning campaign is what the field does, but there are several other fields that are making up with strategic communication. One of them is political communication.

Political communication has interpersonal elements and other elements so you might even say that there's a big force between political communications with political campaigns, might be the force of big ones but it is a little harder to make those arguments so for us we can still keeping it with other fields. The other fields include the other things like antiterrorism communication.

There is a lot of antiterrorism and antiterrorism communication campaign is the only one part. So it is not a field which is characterized only by strategic communication campaigns as was the big-three. And I just want to point out that when I talk about antiterrorism campaigns; unfortunately, another area of strategic communication is terrorism communications. The kinds of things you see, ISIS and what it's trying to do is to appeal to people in Russia or in the United States or anywhere else to go and join ISIS. And so one message to take away from there that I do much more about in the book is strategic communication is not inherently good or inherently bad, it is not inherently good or evil. It is inherently powerful. But it used by folks for good reasons and sometimes for bad reasons and when strategic communication is used for bad reasons the only tool that really affects the fighting for you is strategic communication for good reasons. And that's what antiterrorism communication is.

Public diplomacy is another whole area of strategic communication but there's more that public diplomacy than strategic communication, so it is contribute field. Public diplomacy is when a government communicates to the publics in another country for the purpose of influencing the behaviors of those country government. So it's running public communication campaign to the publics of another country to try to influence the behavior of the government in that country. Diplomacy is not what we do, diplomacy is relations between governments. We only do public diplomacy.

Then there is a whole area of nation building, so all of the campaigns have been used particularly in the developing role for nation building, including public health, national development campaign to overcome ethnic or religious or other rivals. All of these are kinds of strategic communication campaigns.

So now I said that you're probably confused, so let me tell you what I think the field of strategic communication is. And for that I use an idea of the tree and it's very simple. So a tree has a trunk. And a trunk is something that all of the parts of the tree have in common. Ideas like publics, strategy, strategic planning and things like that across all of these fields — it's the trunk. And a tree has a number of branches. And the branches are separated from each other as the fields are separated from each other. The biggest three branches on this tree would be public relations, marketing communications, and public health communication and then each branch has on it a number of leaves and those are specialties within the fields. So some people do internet work, some people do videos, some people

do speeches, some people write releases, so all the specialties. A lot of the leaves look the same as other leaves.

It is an important thing about the tree because the branches are the fields and the trunk is what we have in common across all of these fields. And that's what strategic communication should, in my view, both study and train people to practice. It's the commonalities all across these fields. So people think that strategic communication might work in public relations but the same person might work in marketing instead. Another one might work in public diplomacy. And because they trained in those commonalities instead of common theories they have foundation of doing these things.

I'm ready now to move to the idea of co-creation. And that's where I'm linking back to what professor Eadie said a little bit ago. Let me step back and say that ever since the informational revolution that several people have already talked about today. What we have is that communication has changed a lot, how we communicate has changed a lot, how much we communicate has changed in huge amount. You get all of this stuff everyday. But maybe most important who communicates or who plays what communication role, has changed many the most. And what's happening is that the last, depends on how we measure it, maybe for last 30-40 years, in my view, is that publics are now able to create and share their own views, their own understandings, their own meanings of all the values. Without relying on mass media or government organizations, without having the access to the expensive channels of communication of information like broadcast, nowadays publics communicate with one another, a lot of that is through the Internet. But it's not always social media, twitter and those sort of things, and in fact on thing that happen is that there was a time in history when publics has accident way to get information, handle it from governments, religious authorities, cooperation, whatever, and in the form of advertising. Advertising is the part of strategic communication by the way.

So publics had some independent role at one time in history. Nowadays for a number of reasons, education is a part of it; our publics are becoming much, much more able to engage in communication between each other, even across national and international boundaries, worldwide, and to engage in creating new meanings, new understandings to the other publics without recourse to cooperation or to the government or whatever. And so we find that nowadays cooperations have to monitor and government has to monitor what's going on between publics. Publics exchange information and creates new meanings and creates new attitudes, new values. And new values, the organization or the government has to monitor those in order to keep up so that not to left them behind and maybe most important today, particularly since the informational revolution.

Individuals can now create their own publics, can intentionally create their own publics, can reach out other individuals without government, or cooperation, organization or even university can reach out other individuals and create a light minded situation. Create a common, shared values and interpretations of the behaviors of organizations the value of a product, the behavior of government, whatever. They even can do this worldwide in sometimes in the matter of something. So what I'm concerned with years is the co-creation of meaning. Essentially what I am saying is that today when we run strategic communication campaigns what happens is we run the campaign and it is over here, this is what we doing in a communication practice, we run a campaign and we produce a campaign which includes the strategy and all the tactics implemented, and those we try to send them to publics. Publics receive that information but receive a little concerned with. Publics are also come to the relationship with us, with our organizations or with our governments that come to these relationships with the whole range of the own values, use personal experiences, goals, opinions or friends or family values or all that kinds of things.

So what happens is that publics bring huge information and our campaign a little information and what co-creation is in strategic communications is what those things come together. The publics then co-create new meanings, they stated with their own opinion and we start without our own opinions, the question is that things work together. What happens is that publics co-create new meanings and all co-creation means is that they take their own meanings and the meanings from our campaigns and they put them together, they co-create a new set of meanings or a new set of interpretations. And those are in my view is the real meaning of our campaigns. Our campaigns, we have a goal, we have a policy of organization instead of strategy, we have goals of our campaigns, and the real affect to the campaign is really going to be determined by publics.

And so you can see what I'm going to say about sovereign publics in just about a minute. This is not a new idea this is what professor Eadie was talking about earlier, at the personal level. So there is nothing really new in this idea of co-creation, it is sort of a world view. Those we form from the constructions or constructivist view and I feel really comfortable with this idea. This is essentially a constructivist idea. So those are a form of a sense making perspective are also comfortable with this, this is a kind of sense-making. And I have those discussions in the book but we don't have time for them today. So that is not a new idea. What happens is that the most strategic communication historically focuses on applied level, tactics, the implementation of the campaigns. And we didn't put enough attention of who plans the campaign, how to plan or what strategies to use and what theory we would use to organize our campaigns.

All I am calling for essentially is that we professionalize and theorize better about strategic communication. So we can apply the same idea of co-creation which is constructive for all the time or other fields and we can apply that to the field of strategic communications. And I have to admit to you that I come from public relations I was a PR-practitioner and for about fifteen years before becoming an academic that I became in 45 or something. And my field is public relations. And I don't intend there to give up to anyone and that's important because the branches from the trees and we don't have to surrender the fields of the idea of strategic communication. Strategic communication is not an attempt to swallow or subordinate any fields. And we talk about the commonalities that share across the field, the use in the strategic communication campaigns. And the field that is done probably the best work of that so far and so many of them are done here, in the school is that the marketing communication forms. And marketing communication specialists have published the idea of co-creation now probably about eight or ten years. If you look up to the journal articles and marketing communication you will find probably more discussion of co-creation there than anywhere else.

What the marketing people basically, I'm concerned with that, let's say of what you do is a many factors cup. And you've got ten million cups a day, right? What is the value of those cups and what's concerning this, folks? And some folks follow the older tradition for instance, from the Marxists view the cup represents crystallized human labor. And idea of surplus labor is that not always do pay as people make the cup. And so that coffee comes from, those sorts of things.

Other folks have a different way of view and their view is that the value of the cup includes all of the investments, all of the resources they need to make a cup. But what those of co-creation are saying is that well those cups don't have coherent value. Whether there is labor or other resources crystallize the cup. It does not matter in terms of the cup. The only thing according to these marketing communication scholars that give the commodity, give the product value, and the public saves this value and we buy it. So if there is no value in the eyes of publics, or put another way around. Publics define value from the co-creational point of view. And that is true that marketing, as it would be a public relations or as it is in public

health. So the value of the information of the public health campaign is defined by the publics who participate in campaign and make judgments, co-create meanings of the campaign.

That brings us to the final idea I will do this quickly. And this is an idea of sovereign publics. It's kind of what I am doing here and that the idea was sovereign. And sovereign is something that has no authority there right. To be sovereign like a sovereign country, make its own rules, make its own laws that are not subordinate to other laws. So what I am asking is in the strategic communication relationship, where is that sovereign public. Who is that free to make own judgments and is independent on judgments so much of others can use them. And for me that is the publics. The clients decide for us and those in strategic communication dependent on a client and employers, they decide whether we compare full around. But its publics who decide whether our campaign succeeds or fails. We don't do that. Remember in our campaign we only contribute this much, the publics contribute much more to the relationships. And that's what they co-create out of these two contributions. That defines whether the campaigns going to be success or failure in the eyes of organization, so publics of the sovereign force in strategic communication and my view is that we should have that bottom-up view, right? This view of the publics as the center of force, probably should be used, in my view, across all of the strategic communication fields, both of the big three and all the other fields.

And that the kind of commonality that we are looking for, and this idea of co-creation in the strategic communication. Publics today are more independent than in any time of the past. They therefore have more sovereignty than that in any time of the past. And today we all enter to the publics, more than the publics enter to us. That means that we want to know or we should want to know what are publics understand in the way that different from us as you know we all differ from our publics. We want to know if our publics are negative about the clients' products or PR campaign or a candidate. We want to know their respectively or how they cross the organization. For that reason than, because public makes decisions, we always have to start and end all the strategic communication campaign with a research. We have to research publics to understand the values, than we make a campaign, construct campaign that come us closer as we can, as we have our backgrounds or our limitations to meeting the needs of publics. When we've done that, then publics will take their own backgrounds and their own values and experiences and go co-create those meanings and one of those meanings will be whether in our campaign as a success or the failure.

Thank you.