



# Convergence and Drama in the Digital Age: A Humanistic Perspective on Public Relations and Public Diplomacy<sup>1</sup>

**Robert E. Brown**  
Harvard University Extension School

*Social and digital media's fast and furious penetration of social and political institutions and virtually every aspect of human communication and behavior has not only transformed public relations, but has resulted in numerous instances of convergence, including the increasing integration of public relations and public diplomacy. Twitter, Facebook and other technological tools are now carrying the messages of diplomats and elected officials in all levels of governments worldwide, as well as becoming a favorite avenue of communication for public diplomacy. In the new media world of bottom-up, user-generated content, ordinary individuals, as well as university professors, students, musicians, athletes, celebrities and others now constitute a global network for the exchange of political, romantic, aesthetic, religious, professional, and personal messages. In what can be called 'the public relations of everything,' relationship creation has been leveled, expanded, opened, and in some instances, democratized*

**KEY WORDS:** awe, public relations, convergence, public affairs, public diplomacy, drama, diplomacy, influence, rhetoric, opinion, irrational, Grunig, Science, humanities  
**PALABRAS CLAVE:** relaciones públicas, convergencia, relaciones institucionales, diplomacia pública, influencia, retórica i opinión

**I** want to thank Enric Ordeix for his gracious invitation to offer some remarks where it's afternoon in Barcelona –but as one of our recent US presidents liked to say, it's morning in America–.

In a sense, my initial venture Skyping across the ocean represents a reality that, I believe, supports the theme of my remarks.

And so to begin. This is a tale of two relatives. Brothers, perhaps. Or sisters.

No one really knows when they were born. But I suspect that they came from the same tribe. They had common ancestors –for they are what we call kissing cousins–.

I'm talking about public relations and public diplomacy.

Which is another way of saying that I'm talking about influence and power. Before anyone objects that I've left out negotiation, conversation and ethics –I promise I'll get to that–.

And this is also another way of saying that I'm talking about the phenomenon known as convergence –the tendency, accelerated by new technologies– for phenomena, people and institutions to move toward each other in the muddy middle.

In what follows, I am going to make a series of connections between public relations and public diplomacy. And I will factor in another close relation: public affairs.

I believe that in this age of crisis –from the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico to the financial panic in the streets of Athens and its threat to you in Barcelona and the Iberian peninsula– public and private relations and diplomacy have much to teach us.

*Let's call this clan the brotherhood of the publics. Or, to be gender neutral, the sisterhood of influence.*

Many of us who teach, research, write about and practice PR, PD and PA –as I will abbreviate them– have on occasion been troubled by the confusion that surrounds the perception of these terms. What are they? How are they alike and different?

In academia, we're in the business of devising definitions –which is a good thing and a bad thing. It's good because we want to clarify matters by saying what something is and is not. But it's not good because too often we are guilty of being too hasty to say what something is at the expense of pretending that it simply has no relationship to something else.

Some say that public relations belongs to the sciences. It's applied communication. Others insist it's an art – or a combination of art and science.

Some say public relations is a modern phenomenon. Others –I am one– believe that its modernity is too dismissive of its classical rhetorical sources.

Some say public relations is a communication system best explained by engineering, mechanics and systems theory. Others –including me– are skeptical.

I may look like a twenty-first century man, with my Blackberry on my hip. But I'm a bit Old School, as we say here. In searching for answers to intellectual matters, I turn habitually to the humanities. I have nothing against systems theory. Or engineers. But in seeking to describe the behavior or humanity, society and organizations, I prefer Aristotle.

I admire the elegance of inferential statistical research. But what compels me are the perennial, complex, tragic and comic truths of history, philosophy, rhetoric and poetry. It is in these that I see, from time to time, the face of public



relations. Aristotle himself was drawn to Homer, as St Paul, the great public relations guru of Christianity, was drawn to Aristotle.

It's not that I don't believe in drawing distinctions between ideas. There's good and bad in preferring connection to distinction. The good is what the French call 'lateral thinking.' The bad is what is dismissed as mere 'stream of consciousness.'

So in what follows, I will not labor much to make overly fine distinctions between public relations and closely related strategies associated with communication, negotiation, influence and power. Rather I will seek to demonstrate their structural connections.

My theme today is connection. In our emerging world of powerful technologies, globalized markets, perpetual crises, civil wars, terrorism and nuclear proliferation, we must learn to see the connections between public relations and public diplomacy. Separately, and as they converge, PR and PD have what may be life-saving, redemptive lessons to teach us.

For not only are they connected – but like cable TV and Internet TV; like banking and IT; like so many modern phenomena, public relations and public affairs are converging.

Which reminds me of something I read by the Catholic mystic, Thomas Merton. Having devoted much of his spirituality and literary efforts to the pursuit of solitude, Merton received a letter from a man who said he deeply wished to find solitude. Merton replied that for such a man, it was not at all unlikely that he would eventually discover that he had been solitary all along. In other words, the man had missed the connection he so fiercely sought.

And this, too, is true of public relations and public diplomacy. In the digital and social media age –with its characteristically conversational, rather than broadcasted communication; with its emotional preference for third-party perception over reality; with its lust for rumor over fact–; we are like the man who discovers he has been solitary all along. In other words, PR and public diplomacy may be converging. But they have always been connected.

What follows are ten reflections on these connections. Ten meditations on the sources of this convergence, the problems it poses for us –and because I'm that PR guy who sees the glass as half full, not half empty, I will pour out the great promise convergence holds.

### **Point One: Both PR and PD are fundamentally heterological**

As Aristotle demonstrated in *Ars Rhetorica*, rhetoric is not limited to being a guide to persuasion. It's broader. It's world view –a sophisticated and ethical way of apprehending human, social, economic and political experience–. In the jargon of PR, it's "two-way." The PR scholar Robert Heath has been making this point in book after book for the last few decades.

I pause here for a commercial. Bob Heath's second edition of the *Handbook of Public Relations* is scheduled to be published in July. Chapter 19 on PR theory, ethics and history is mine.



They are joined at the hip: public affairs, public diplomacy, public relations.

**Point Two: A river runs through them: the river of public opinion**

A half century ago, a political theorist offered this observation about public opinion as understood by classical philosophy:

Plato readily disparaged democratic politics, seeing philosophy as the rightful director of human affairs and questioning the competence of any large number of people to deliberate philosophical concerns. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that the collective sentiments of the *demos* could contribute a sort of common sense to political affairs.

**Point Three: PR and PD address complex issues**

Which is another way of saying about PR and PD what Marshall McLuhan said famously about media: That they are extensions of ourselves. You and I have issues. And like the White House, the Kremlin, Beijing, Barcelona. Like Toyota and Tiger Woods, we address our issues strategically lest they spread like an oil slick into a crisis. We are rhetoricians. We analyze our audiences, our publics. We know we need to craft our messages clearly, but with diplomatic and strategic ambiguity. We know that our effectiveness may lie not within us, but in our audience's perception of the credibility of the third party who endorses us and our message.

**Point Four: PR and PD are dramatic**

The great social theorist, Erving Goffman, taught us that to grasp what is really happening in front of us, we need a different frame. What Goffman's theory of dramaturgy brings into perspective is this: that what we talk about when we about communication comes down to the proscenium arch. Life is theater. Our lives, and the lives of our families, organizations, nations and culturally framed geographies like Barcelona –all these lives, all our strategic moves, all our framing is enacted on a stage–. We are drama Kings and drama Queens. To earn applause we must learn and practice dramaturgical discipline.

**Point Five**

Now I am going to say something rather radical for a tenured professor of communication: Communication is not a sufficient answer. The concept of communication is simply inadequate a concept to apprehend the complex realities addressed by public relations and public diplomacy. Twenty years ago, in the U.S., the National Communication Association was called the Speech Communication Association. That was the great battle: the communication partisans finally defeated the speech partisans. But like so many historical battles, that one feels irrelevant today. We need to look beyond speech, beyond communication.

To quote Goffman writing in the 1970s: "The broadening of the concept communication, then, has been a doubtful service; communication systems



themselves have been neglected and the field of face-to-face interaction embraced by arms too small for it".

Let me illustrate my radical claim with a gesture to a fundamental, and perhaps understandably obsessive interest in an idea –the idea of branding–. Today, we're all about branding. To save face is to protect brand equity. And the theater of public relations is a battlefield of brands. As Dr. Freud observed in *Civilization and its Discontents*, the source of the battle for brand identity is not without but within: "Aggressiveness was not created by property... it already shows itself in the nursery..."

What is more dramatic than a brand? *Brand is God*. That advertising and marketing mantra is now appropriated by all persuaders –political, governmental, military, commercial, for-profit, nonprofit, religious–. Brand partakes of perception, impression management, and identity. Today, the social web has made free branding a tool for self-presentation.

What is more compellingly dramatic than sex? Sex sells. The sexiest brand names need but one name, not two. Madonna. Britney. Gable. Brando. Obama. On the darker side, Mussolini, Hitler.

Brand is driven by –and to– desire. With aspirational. Therein appears to be branding's difference from the practice of public relations. Brand is the object of desire that branding seeks to fulfill. Play, anarchy, violence, sexuality, ridicule, absurdity, devotion, obsession: According to a theorist of brand positioning, Al Ries, advertising is playful, but public relations is serious. And from this dubious premise, Ries concludes this is why advertising is no longer the primary creator of brands. What creates brands Ries said, writing at the beginning of this decade, is public relations. Starbucks. Red Bull. Jet Blue. Southwest Airlines.

He's half correct. Public relations has much to do with the success of these brands. But these brands grew not because of traditional publicity-driven, newspaper and magazine broadcasted PR. Their secret is that they weren't secret at all. They were on the tips of our tongues. Literally –in the case of Starbucks' Red Bull–. The airline brands Jet Blue and Southwest Air took flight, in part, because of conversation, stories, word of mouth. And what are stories without drama?

Branding is competitive, and competition is dramatic. The marketplace is, after all, a battlefield. The scholar Francis Cornford observed that the ancient Greeks had two defining traits: loquacity and competitiveness. They excelled at speech making, and they were fiercely competitive. In these traits we can recognize the rhetorical ancestry of public relations. In these characteristics, we can trace the profoundly civilizing institutions of the polis and the Olympics. These civilizing traits and their institutional expressions are hard-wired into Western civilization. And of course, the Greeks gave Western civilization the Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripedes.

We are verbal. We are players. We are *homo ludens*.

**Point Six: In much writing about public relations and public diplomacy, Human rationality has been over-emphasized**

For more than two generations, the dominant paradigm, or theory, about public relations has been summed up in a single word: symmetry. In essence, symmetry posits that an organization's public relations practice can't be excellent unless it's fair.

Who could dispute such a noble ideal? That public relations must not be about desire or manipulation. It must not even be about winning. Or persuasion. Not even about outcomes.

It ought to be about the fairness of the negotiation, the conversation –the process.

In a 1980s-era movie called "Wall Street," the Michael Douglas character voiced this famous bit of wisdom: "Greed is good." The theory of symmetry turned that adage inside out by insisting that when it comes to public relations, greed is bad.

We ought to be fair to each other. We should be civil. But these are not our reflections in the mirror of art. Nor in religious scripture.

In Euripedes "The Bacchae," driven by a vengeful god, an arrogant King is quite literally torn to pieces by an enraged band of wild women, including the King's own daughter. Daughters can be lethal, as Shakespeare's King Lear learned.

The Greeks had a word for it –the ineffable brutality in human nature–. They called it *sparagmos*. It's what Achilles does to Hector. It persists in the hostage video beheadings.

And that's what happens in a classic American country song by Patsy Cline. "I Go to Pieces." That's what love can do to you, isn't it?

Brutality. Irrationality. Surely, these can't be associated with public relations! For several generations, the dominant theory of public relations –symmetry– has quite simply assumed human rationality.

Symmetry is a normative theory, which means it's more about what ought to be than what is. Like its benign, professorial creator, symmetry is a positive and upbeat theory. It favors the light over the darkness, science and math over poetry and art. Unamuno, with his tragic sense of life, would surely have objected.

According to Professor Grunig: "Systems theory emphasizes the interfaces between organizations and their environments, as well as between subsystems and the organizational whole".

The rationalist scholars see public relations through a normative, aspirational lens, not a dramatic one. Through science, not the humanities.

Impressed by the rising prestige of science and technology, the early twentieth century pioneers of public relations embraced not so much engineering itself as the romantic metaphor of engineering. Public relations could be reinvented as a science with the persuasiveness of scientific methodology, and speak to us in the elegantly mathematical language of science.

The PR pioneer Edward L. Bernays entitled one of his early books the "engineering of consent." Unsurprisingly, the prospect that public consent could be engineered appealed to a part of humanity that the poet William Butler Yeats called "the worst." In the 1920s, the worst included the Nazi minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. He kept a copy of Bernays' books on his shelf. But



that's as far as he got with the PR pioneer who happened to be Jewish.

Symmetry theory rests uneasily on a pair of very large and dubious assumptions. The first is that of human rationality. The second is the rationality of organizational systems.

But as we look around us, we find that the evidence fails to support these assumptions. As the English satirist Jonathan Swift said, Man is *capax rationis* –capable of reason–. But in his *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift, a Catholic dean, portrays the absurd and ultimately monstrous irrationality of humanity.

Let me pause to make this observation. My understanding of the public nature of public relations and public diplomacy has its source in my experience of myself and my relationships with others. I am not uncomfortable navigating public and private space. Or moving from the private and interpersonal to the public and political. In fact, it is there –in the interstices– that I discover public diplomacy, or the state-sponsored actions of private citizens.

And what are expressions of public diplomacy? They're private.

An obscure American professor dines with the president of a formerly shunned nation anxious to gain positive U.S. public opinion. The professor and the politician: a pair of performers believing –or not believing– in their performances. And the audience for this private/public diplomatic encounter is none other than public opinion. The same target as that of public relations. As the philosopher Pascal said: "Power rules the world, not opinion, but it is opinion that exploits power."

### Point Seven

Public relations these days emphasizes the rationality of conversations, while leveraging the nonverbal, video, incendiary, heart-pounding hilarity of YouTube. What's old is new again: Consider the propagation of awe. Awesomeness is, I believe, no less the source of public relations than conversation. Without the miracles, what would have become of Christianity?

The popes of the Catholic Reformation understood the propagation of awe. In battling against the evisceration of their brand by rising Protestantism, the arty and crafty popes were corporate clients who paid for hired guns: Michelangelo and his Sistine ceiling. Bernini and his Saint Teresa.

P.T. Barnum, that hero of PR text books, that nineteenth century charlatan and circus master amid the growth of the youthful United States, understood the propagation of awe when he drew audiences into his circus tent and freak shows enrapture them with jumbo elephants, amuse them with dwarfs, and shock them with terrifying lions and bearded ladies.

It's not for nothing that America called its initial night bombing of Baghdad Shock and Awe.

IEDs are awe. September 11 was awe. Madrid March 3 was awe.

Of course, that brings up the very complex questions about propaganda and ethics, which we have too little time today for an adequate discussion. Suffice it to say that while many attempts have been made to make hard distinctions between PR and propaganda, none have been entirely convincing. Edward L.



Bernays, that pioneer of modern PR, simply changed the name of his agency from the Propaganda Bureau to the Public Relations Counsel. It reminds me of that ad for Nike: Just do it! Bernays just did it.

Public relations will always be, in part, the propagation of awe. Today, awe is propagated in the media by the mayhem of World Wide Wrestling, violent video games, pornography, gambling, and reality TV shows. Public opinion is awe-struck by the propulsive rage emanating from television and radio talk shows –blistering our limbic systems with what US Republican political strategist Karl Rove calls “anger point”–.

We’re a species that feeds on fury. We are consumers of crises. We can’t get enough. Crises small and large, personal, political and environmental spew out at us from the always open firehose of all our media channels.

The brilliant organizational theorist, Clay Shirkey, makes this point: “Our social tools remove older obstacles to public expression, and thus remove the bottlenecks that characterized mass media. The result is the mass amateurization of efforts previously reserved for media professionals.”

Amateurs. We professionals must learn to be amateurs so we can propagate awe. We formal writers must learn how to write colloquially so we can spawn engaging conversations. We wordsmiths must learn to edit video and program games.

**Point Eight: The conventional wisdom that public relations and public diplomacy must now avoid drama and focus on engagement and conversation is only partly true**

In the digital age, the old hard sell has gone soft. That was the bitter lesson for the hard-sell approach to America’s public diplomacy as practiced by a former advertising executive named Charolotte Beers. She was undersecretary of public diplomacy under U.S. President G.W. Bush. Amid the rising tide of negative opinion over US foreign policy, Secretary Beers tried and failed to turn the tide. Her strategy was from her advertising industry playbook: Just sell “the American story” to the world.

But no one bought it.

What did sell –at least for a while– was an awe-inspiring image: The face of the first African-American president in the history of America. It, too, was a kind of shock and awe, moving world public opinion as no conversation could.

Here’s a convergence-oriented frame for public diplomacy Undersecretary For Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Judith A. McHale, May 6, 2010, at an event in Washington D.C.: “The State Department’s public diplomacy programs manifest the importance we place on strengthening our nation by enhancing the capacity of America and Americans to thrive in the interconnected world of the 21st century. But the time when we could leave the practice of foreign relations to the diplomats is long past. While we in government can lead, and convene, and even cajole, we can’t do it all.

I have just two points to make before I close.



**Point Nine: We are living today in an age of crisis**

Like propaganda, crisis is far too complex for a full treatment here. But today, crisis appears to be a pandemic affecting coastlines, polar bears, undisciplined politicians and celebrities, corporations, and of course, brands.

We have created the perfect recipe for perpetual crisis, like the world of perpetual war in George Orwell's dystopic book, *1984*. Our obsession with speed. Our creation of and access to the tools that spread rumor. We've accelerated envy, lust, and the rest of those seven cardinal sins. All these have highlighted the Kierkegaard's proposition: that existence is not solid and stable, but shifting and contingent, which breeds dread. The center, as the poet Yeats wrote, cannot hold.

But of course, I simply can't end on this minor chord. I happen to believe that the proverbial glass is half full, not half empty. After all, I am a PR guy!

**Point Ten**

Given our hungry and paradoxical nature, the powerful trend called convergence holds a great deal of promise.

What is convergence but a dynamic feature of the postindustrial information-communication economy. As that extraordinary, if dubiously authoritative reference tool, Wikipedia, said a few weeks ago: "Technological *convergence* is the tendency for different technological systems to evolve towards performing similar tasks."

For our purposes today, if distinctions between public relations and marketing were hazy before web 1.0, they're becoming invisible with each new digital generation.

In the convergence of public relations and public diplomacy, I believe there exists a solution that is more than the sum of its parts.

If public relations propagates awe, then cultural diplomacy can propagate the diplomatic awesomeness of Duke Ellington and the Barsa football team.

If the "new" PR of Twitter, SEO and flip-cam video can engage others in conversation, then public diplomacy can draw on the tweeting, flip-camming teams of Olympians, and the conversational skills and wisdom of the private citizens of America and Barcelona engaging with the private citizens and public officials of Beijing and Madrid.

If I've spoken like Jeremiah, allow me to sing like Solomon.

To grasp the promise of convergence, I look to visionaries. Like the American poet, Walt Whitman who celebrated the construction of the Suez Canal –as a great convergence of West and East, past, present and future–:

"It avails not, time nor place –distance avails not–,/I am with you, men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,/Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,/Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd".

And I admire these lines written by Tomas Garcés, a Catalan poet, who like the American poet Hart Crane a century ago raises his voice to celebrate the Brooklyn Bridge, that symbol of the unification that is the byproduct of convergence. The translation is by D. Sam Abrams:



Oh suspended bridge, towering pathway!  
Topless landaus, jingling horses coursed  
up and down, and ladies with parasols  
and flowers pinned to their bosom gently smiled.  
Close upon the railing, the shade of iron,  
impassive blacks labored.  
And small paddle steamers,  
down below, ground the water beneath the bridge.

And so I end here where I began: Using Skype, a technology of visionaries, to cross a vast ocean in an instant. And so I converge with you, my friends and colleagues, from Boston to Barcelona.

I am like that puzzled man who asked a mystic how it might be possible to find solitude –only to be told that he might discover he had been solitary all along.

So the puzzled man's crisis turns out to have been only an illusion.  
But this morning I neither in crisis nor solitude.  
I have spent my Boston morning in your Barcelona afternoon.

Thank you!

Robert E. Brown,  
Ph.D. Professor, Communications Dept., Salem State College; Adjunct,  
Harvard University Extension School.  
[www.extension.harvard.edu](http://www.extension.harvard.edu)  
Web site: [d28man.com](http://d28man.com)  
Blogging at: [gatheringthelight.wordpress.com](http://gatheringthelight.wordpress.com)  
Twitter: @gatheringlight

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> This conference presentation was published in the July 2010 issue of *Vital Speeches of the Day*.