

AI cheerleaders: Public relations, neoliberalism and artificial intelligence

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pri**Clea Bourne** 

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Abstract

Public relations' (PR) professional habitus is defined by a relentless focus on optimism and futurity. This professional habitus renders PR indispensable to the corporate world after crisis, when new, potentially controversial, growth strategies must be sold-in to stakeholders. This article argues that PR's professional habitus is heavily influenced by neoliberalism, an ideology which 'confidently identifies itself with the future'. The discussion is timely, as 21st-century neoliberal capitalism becomes redefined by artificial intelligence (AI). The article combines PR theory, communications theory and political economy to consider the changing shape of neoliberal capitalism, as AI becomes naturalised as 'common sense' and a 'public good'. The article explores how PR supports AI discourses, including promoting AI in national competitiveness and promoting 'friendly' AI to consumers, while promoting Internet inequalities. The article concludes that the PR profession's myopia regarding the implications of promoting AI and neoliberalism is shaped by poor levels of diversity in the PR profession.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, discourse, ethics, neoliberalism, public relations, voice

Artificial intelligence's cheerleaders: Neoliberalism's next wave

On 13 June 2018, the PRCA, a trade body for UK public relations (PR), debated the following motion: *'The workforce in public relations will considerably reduce as a result of Artificial Intelligence and automation'*. The lecture theatre was small, but full. The audience was invited to vote on the motion before the debate began: 9 for, 29 against. The proposing team used hard facts and figures to sound a warning over job losses. The

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opposing team cheered on artificial intelligence (AI) as a bright future filled with opportunity. The audience voted again after the debate: but the numbers scarcely moved. As the audience filed out of the lecture theatre, a senior in-house practitioner confided in me that despite agreeing with the sober tone of the moot, he had still voted against it. I asked why. He replied that he felt a duty to be *optimistic* about the future of the PR profession. A similar collective confidence drives much of the industry discourse about AI in PR; in particular, the rose-tinted dream that AI will free-up PR practitioners to focus on strategic counsel, even if this means the loss of many junior and technical PR roles, once they are delegated to robots.

PR's professional habitus: Optimism and futurity

PR's professional habitus is defined by a relentless focus on optimism and futurity (Bourne, 2017). This professional habitus renders PR indispensable to the corporate world after crisis, when PR acts as 'cheerleader' for new, potentially controversial, strategies, selling-in invention and growth to stakeholders. But how did such optimism and futurity come to be written into PR's DNA? In this article, I argue that modern PR practices are themselves heavily shaped by neoliberalism, an ideology which 'confidently identifies itself with the future' (Brown, 2006: 27). The article's discussion is timely since, by some accounts, neoliberalism is moving into a new phase; shaped by new technologies and an AI-led 'superintelligent' economy (Pueyo, 2017; Purdy and Daugherty, 2016).

While PR's collective habitus of optimism and futurity is welcome with client-organisations, it conflicts with PR's aspiration to be an ethical practice and a societal good (Grunig et al., 2002; Heath, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2014). As long as PR repeatedly frames itself as *the* corporate solution without ever interrogating its own role in corporate problems, the PR profession can never learn from past mistakes. This was recently evident in PR's failure to acknowledge its role in the 2008 financial crisis, following years of promoting financial markets as never-ending 'boom', 'and to hell with bust' (Pitcher, 2008: 69). The chance of any such crisis-introspection is long past. PR is now called on to address more pressing issues. Many developed economies stalled during the post-crisis decade – notably the United States and much of Europe. The need for new invention and growth is vital. AI has been positioned as the necessary 'shot in the arm' for these economies. 'The rise of big-data optimism is here', says Noble (2018), 'if ever there were a time when politicians, industry leaders, and academics were enamored with artificial intelligence as a superior approach to sense-making, it is now' (p. 169). Such reinvigorated neoliberal sense-making has, in turn, given companies new motive to put PR on speed-dial.

This article combines scholarship on PR and neoliberalism (e.g. Roper, 2005; Surma and Demetrious, 2018), with recent interrogations of neoliberalism in the political economy (e.g. Davies, 2014; Mirowski and Nik-Khah, 2017) to explore PR's latest efforts to legitimise neoliberal discourses. The discussion is further interwoven with recent communications and PR scholarship on AI and automation (e.g. Collister, 2016; Guzman, 2019; Moore, 2018; Noble, 2018) to consider how PR's own efforts to normalise AI into everyday life could, in turn, change the shape of everyday PR practice.

PR on behalf of AI is understood here to be a form of discourse work (Pieczka, 2013), encompassing public affairs and political communication by government ministries and departments, political lobbying, corporate communications by global technology firms, Business-to-Business communication by global management consultancies, as well as Business-to-Consumer communications by tech start-ups. As part of discourse work, PR, in its different forms, is expected to privilege certain voices over others in order to legitimise AI technologies. However, unlike some of the discourses PR has been called on to legitimise in the past – for example, free trade, financialisation, outsourcing or extractive technologies – naturalising AI as a way of life has direct implications for society, for democracy and for the future of PR itself.

My discussion over the next pages is driven by these overarching questions: Whose voices are privileged by PR's efforts to normalise AI as a neoliberal ideal? Whose voices are marginalised? What are the implications of this privileging and marginalising for aspirations of an ethical PR practice? To answer these questions, I begin the article by looking at PR's historical links with voice in market-led discourses, arguing that the forms of PR described above habitually privilege the corporate voice above others. In the second section of the article, I explore some of the different ways PR has been used to normalise AI as neoliberal discourse. In the third section, I consider the broader ethical implications of the PR industry's uncompromising support for AI discourses, particularly when AI 'bakes in' long-standing societal inequalities. I conclude by emphasising the need for PR to support a wider range of voices in AI discourses, in light of the movement for Responsible AI.

AI and neoliberalism: *Machina economicus*

The term 'Artificial Intelligence' or AI was coined in the 1950s by John McCarthy, who defined it as 'the endeavor to develop a machine that could reason like a human' (Dignum, 2018). Sixty years later, this endeavour is not yet reality. AI includes a host of activities, including cognitive robotics and human-agent-robot interaction (Dignum, 2018). However, much of what we currently call AI is 'machine learning', where machines are taught through complex algorithms, enabled by greater 21st-century computing power. Machines gather and learn information from the world's biggest 'school book' – the avalanche of 'big data' shared by humans online.

The PR industry has much to gain from promoting AI, because of the sheer range of economic sectors currently profiting from AI technologies. The healthcare sector uses AI in wearable tech, facial recognition and other diagnostic tools designed to detect vital signs and physical wellness. The financial sector uses AI to trade securities, offer 'robo-advice' to investors and track consumer data for insurance policies. The travel, leisure and retail sectors all use AI to take customer orders, redirect customer queries and respond to customer complaints. The defence sector has invested billions in AI-assisted surveillance, target and decoy technologies.

However, while the PR industry benefits directly from the expansion of AI enterprise, PR industry bodies have been forced to respond to professional uncertainty about PR jobs and status, where threatened by AI technologies (Valin, 2018). These industry responses have taken the form of fact-finding missions, for example, identifying the

number of AI tools now used in PR – estimated to be at least 150, according to one UK study (Slee, 2018). Industry reports generally assess AI tools as a ‘good thing’, enabling PR professionals to act ‘more quickly and with greater intelligence’ (Weiner and Kochhar, 2016: 5). AI tools are even portrayed as the ‘genie in the lamp’ – able, at long last, to bestow the respect of company directors on their PR and marketing functions (Tan, 2018). Ultimately, PR industry research cheerily predicts that AI technologies can never replace PR’s human touch with client-organisations (Davis, 2018).

While industry research is designed to comfort PR professionals, a more unsettling industry tone has surfaced. Writing in November 2018, PR consultant and former political adviser, Guto Hari (2018) warned the PR industry that taking a reactive stance to AI amounted to standing in the way of progress. The correct way for the PR industry to approach AI, urged Hari, was with anticipation and excitement:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) poses little threat to our industry – but it provides plenty of opportunities, not least because it will wreak havoc in some sectors and bring mind-blowing breakthroughs in others.

[...] As communicators, we have a responsibility to talk about AI in a positive way, to help ease the way for its assimilation into everyday life. Harnessing AI will allow us to focus on the more human aspects of jobs. Society needs to embrace machines, seeing them as friends, not foes. (Hari, 2018)

Hari further identified a strategic role for PR in AI discourses, stating that companies best able to capitalise on AI were ‘the ones with communicators driving the debate’. Hari’s observations about AI wreaking ‘havoc’ in some sectors, while bringing ‘breakthroughs’ in others, establishes a direct link between PR and the current phase of neoliberalism, which venerates disruption and winner-take-all (Davies, 2014). From the PR industry’s perspective, disruption guarantees PR consultants a place on corporate speed-dials. This is an important consideration at a time when the global PR industry has experienced slower rates of annual growth (Sudhaman, 2018). Unfortunately, the PR industry’s quest for growth has meant that cautionary tales about questionable AI ethics and practices have been largely overlooked (Gregory, 2018).

Legitimising neoliberal futurity through discourse work

Contemporary neoliberalism thrives on a pattern of disruption, followed by growth. Hence, neoliberal futurity never arrives passively (Canavan, 2015). Sector disruption results in high-stakes battles to establish and reinforce particular truths (Motion and Leitch, 2009; Roper, 2005). To this end, neoliberal discourses are typified by disparities in voice and hegemonic struggles favouring economically powerful institutions (Roper, 2005). In the case of AI discourses, dominant voices include governments, think tanks, technology firms, AI investors, global management consultancies, as well as multinational corporations able to purchase AI technologies. PR’s strategic objective is to position the latest neoliberal disruption as inevitable and ‘common-sense’ and consequently a ‘public good’ (Roper, 2005).

As with previous phases of neoliberalism, the emerging AI economy is being aggressively naturalised as *the* common-sense way of life (Pueyo, 2017) – and a ‘public good’ – through persuasive doctrines enabled by PR. Unfettered support for 21st-century AI technologies goes right up the food chain, from multinational businesses to national and regional governments, all keen to compete in the AI ‘space race’. AI spending is forecast to grow from US\$640 million in 2016 to US\$375 billion by 2025 (Peet and Wilde, 2017). Some scholars argue that the advent of a so-called ‘superintelligent’ economy will enable neoliberalism to enter a transformative phase, in which *machina economicus* will replace *homo economicus* as the ultimate rational economic actor (Pueyo, 2017). AI is humanity’s inevitable future – or so we are told. Just as with previous phases of neoliberalism, it would seem ‘There is no alternative’.¹

Neoliberalism’s crisis of voice

Neoliberalism is perhaps best associated with Friedrich von Hayek; although the broader neoliberal intellectual project took on many forms as it evolved in London, New York, Chicago, Freiburg and Vienna (Davies, 2014). Today, neoliberalism encompasses an ideology, a mode of governance, and a policy package (Steger and Roy, 2010). Neoliberal *ideology* has been acutely instrumental in shaping contemporary global capitalism, through its focus on a nation’s capacity to generate wealth (Davies, 2014: 114). Neoliberalism’s common mantra is to organise society by an economic market logic. This has clear implications, not just for nations, but for individuals in all walks of life. Whether we are at school, work or play, the project of neoliberalism is to judge us and measure us *as if* we were acting in a market (Davies, 2014).

Media sociologist, Nick Couldry (2010) argues that neoliberalism’s excessive valuation of markets and market logic has created a crisis of ‘voice’ in democratic societies. Couldry distinguishes ‘voice’ on two levels: voice as process and voice as value. Voice as *process* is a basic feature of human action; it is how we give account of our lives and conditions through our own stories and narratives. To deny anyone her capacity for narrative, her potential for voice, ‘is to deny a basic dimension of human life’ (Couldry, 2010: 7). Couldry (2010) argues that, under neoliberalism, voice as a process is not valued precisely because neoliberalism imposes a reductive view of economic life as ‘market’ onto the *political* (p. 135). Couldry goes further, contending that neoliberalism denies voice altogether, by operating with a view of human life that is incoherent. This is why voice as *value* is the more significant concept, because *choosing* to value voice means discriminating in favour of frameworks for organising human life and resources that put the value of voice into practice.

Couldry (writing with Powell, 2014) later turns his attention to voice and agency in an era of algorithmic-driven automation, advising scholars to rethink how voice might operate in digital environments. Couldry and Powell (2014) argue that the value of voice is ‘not immediately compatible with a world saturated with the automated aggregation of analytic mechanisms that are not, even in principle, open to any continuous human interpretation or review’ (p. 4). The suggestion here is that AI and automation, with its more automatic sensing and calculative logic, eliminates the accountability of voice as a

subjective form of expression. Couldry and Powell (2014) maintain, however, that ‘something similar to “voice” is required in this new world’ (p. 4). They argue that, at present

the proxy for voice in the algorithmic domain is the notion that data gathering processes ought to be transparent, and the logic of calculation revealed. A focus on transparency could begin to foreground notions of accountability in data calculation, ownership and use. (Couldry and Powell, 2014: 4)

Couldry and Powell suggest that a refined concept of transparency, ‘sensitive to the meaning that data trails might form’ would begin to address the concerns of voice in the automated age. This has implications for how an ethical PR might emerge in an age of AI and automation.

PR, corporate voice and market logic

PR has a complex relationship with voice as value, as Anne Cronin argues in her 2018 book, *Public Relations Capitalism*, in which she draws heavily on the work of philosopher, Hannah Arendt (1998 [1958]). Just as neoliberal democracies appear evacuated of true democratic content, PR *promises voice* to the public ‘to engage as consumers or stakeholders in debates and to impact on decisions and issues they consider significant ... PR promises that the public will be heard’ (Cronin, 2018: 54). In other words, says Cronin (2018), PR has come to inhabit and exploit neoliberalism’s democratic gap, ‘speaking the language of democracy and offering to both publics and organisations modes of engagement, agency and voice’ (p. 2). This Arendtian promise is an important pillar of normative PR scholarship, which stipulates that ‘excellent’ PR *ought* to give voice to publics in management decisions affecting them (Grunig et al., 2002). This laudable perspective is honoured more in the breach than the observance. Even the most communicative organisation may only create the *impression* of providing the public with voice, a fantasy further perpetuated as more organisations communicate via social media (Moore, 2018).

Attempting to position PR as a source of *public* voice is deeply problematic, considering that PR has been a chief advocate of neoliberal capitalism for nearly a century (Steger and Roy, 2010). Even before neoliberalism emerged, Logan (2014) traces a very early connection between market ideology and PR to the 1800s, when PR worked in tandem with other occupations to bestow ‘personhood’ on US corporations. Corporations were once deemed ‘artificial persons’ under the law. But, after costly, sustained bombardment of the US legal system, corporations successfully co-opted the Fourteenth Amendment² to acquire legal ‘personhood’, securing greater rights over individuals (Logan, 2018; Mark, 1987). This corroborates Couldry’s (2010) view that having a voice requires practical resources and symbolic status in order to be recognised by others. Logan (2014) goes on to demonstrate how US big business, ably supported by PR and advertising, successfully erased the 19th-century image of the ‘ruthless, corporate giant’, to create a more familiar, accessible ‘economic man’; specifically, the efficient ‘American business man’. With newfound legal rights, corporations expanded aggressively across the US landscape into the 20th century.

Surma and Demetrious (2018) add insight from the 1930s and 1940s, tracing PR's involvement in the emergence of the neoliberal project, and 'unabashed marshalling of public relations as the voice of business, the free market and free enterprise' (p. 93). Drawing on Poerksen (1995: 4), Surma and Demetrious identify one of PR's contributions to neoliberal rhetoric, through disseminating hollow, portable, 'plastic words', which enter everyday language to become accepted as 'common sense'. Surma and Demetrious point to PR's role in propagating plastic words such as 'management', 'solution' and 'progress', which connote positive, futuristic notes, underscored by apocalyptic imperative. Reading Surma and Demetrious's (2018) work in conjunction with Logan's establishes convincingly how often PR provides voice – not to the public – but to corporations, professional lobbyists, think tanks and big business interests (Miller and Dinan, 2008). Twentieth-century alignment between PR and neoliberalism is further cemented in the work of J. Grunig's excellence theory, which traces its roots back to his 1966 thesis on the role of information in decision making (Verčič and Grunig, 2000: 10). Grunig's subsequent body of work acknowledged that stakeholders' lack of information could produce detrimental asymmetries. Grunig's symmetrical communication framework was eventually devised as a means of providing voice to *all* stakeholders. Symmetrical communication is characterised by an organisation's willingness to listen and respond *substantively* to stakeholder concerns and interests (Roper, 2005). At the other end of the spectrum lies two-way asymmetrical communication, which Grunig describes as organisations gleaning information from stakeholders, using the information to allay stakeholder concerns, but failing to alter behaviour accordingly (Roper, 2005).

The 1980s was another pivotal phase for neoliberalism, when many developed nations deregulated their economies and opened market borders. The PR industry experienced its greatest expansion during this period. Much of this expansion was due to PR's successful rhetorical backing of neoliberal market logic over other ideas of how economies might be run (Edwards, 2018, citing Dinan and Miller, 2007). For example, UK policy-making since deregulation has primarily benefitted corporate elites. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, corporate arguments and ideas were given greater share of voice across mass media. PR expertise was regularly summoned to achieve public support for neoliberal policy-making and pro-business political parties (Davis, 2002). By the 2000s, it became increasingly common to find books like Argenti and Forman's (2002) *The Power of Corporate Communication: Crafting the Voice and Image of Your Business*. This treatise asserts that the *real* value of PR is providing corporations with a 'coherent, consistent voice' in a noisy, chaotic business environment (p. 13). The book suggests that the PR profession sees voice in a manner that is antithetical to either Couldry's (2010) or Cronin's (2018) view of voice and democracy, but that it also propagates flawed Grunigian logic.

AI, neoliberalism, non-human voice

Despite sustained informational disparities, the public temporarily found new voice after the 2008 financial crisis, through organised grassroots protest including the high-profile Occupy movement, which made sophisticated use of PR (Kavada, 2015). But Occupy, and other amorphous collectives, eventually fizzled out. Their vain hope was that market

failures exposed by the crisis would spell neoliberalism's demise. Instead, neoliberalism entered a 'state of exception', as governments ignored usual rules of competitive economic activity in order to rescue the financial system and preserve the status quo (Davies, 2014). Resolving this post-crisis mode would require a single cognitive apparatus to gain dominance, providing a shared reality for political, business and expert actors to inhabit (Davies, 2014). Populist ideologies such as US protectionism, or Britain's 'Brexit' from Europe, have proved too divisive for business interests to deliver a successful, shared narrative of the future. This is because different economic sectors – agriculture, manufacturing, retail, financial services – view international trade and labour markets in different ways. By contrast, AI and automation offers the entire business sector a shared narrative, a demonstrable vision of the future and a promise to 'jump start' the global economy through advanced technologies. Newness and change are precisely the messages PR is so well-equipped to sell (Moore, 2018), and it has set about doing so. In the process, PR has helped reinvigorate some of neoliberalism's most portable, hollow plastic words; 'efficiency', 'innovation' and 'progress'. Whereas neoliberalism's *homo economicus* has supposedly proved himself both demanding and perennially *inefficient*, AI is the coveted *machina economicus*, able to process information rationally as *homo economicus* never could, while remaining unaware of, and unaffected by, political uncertainty and societal malaise.

According to Mirowski and Nik-Khah (2017), an obsession with computing machines over humans can be traced back to neoliberal thinker, Friedrich von Hayek, and his preoccupation with rational choice as an organising principle for understanding the political economy. Hayek's vision of the ultimate rational actor was paralleled in the US military, which served as the incubator for the modern computer (Mirowski and Nik-Khah, 2017). Through a marriage of engineering and mainstream economic thought, markets were reconceptualised as information processors. As for humans, we were modelled less as thinkers and more as *inefficient*, low-powered processors, a means of information circulation, rather than thinking subjects (Mirowski and Nik-Khah, 2017). With the advent of AI, the economy supposedly has the ultimate capital-labour hybrid, the 'perfect' model of efficiency. Yet what is too often sidestepped in AI discourses, is that each phase of neoliberalism has its winners *and* losers. Not everyone can be successful in this new, information-driven system (Kember, 2002). Furthermore, an AI-led economy must inevitably incorporate non-human agents into existing human social exchanges. Hence, just as the 20th century legislated corporate personhood, the 21st century could eventually legislate *non-human* personhood for AI. While this may be a long way off, AI has already further deepened neoliberalism's crisis of voice, as I discuss in the next section.

Promoting AI's national competitiveness

PR activity in support of AI's national competitiveness is driven by assorted business interests. Yet AI business interests are often more ably promoted by *governments*, which provide the unifying voice for 'seizing and reimagining' countries and regions as competitive actors in a global contest (Davies, 2014). Whichever state can prove its economy and society to be most 'adaptable, networked and future-oriented' will emerge victorious in neoliberalism's latest global game (Davies, 2014: 118). The United States started out

as the clear leader in AI. China quickly joined the United States as a frontrunner. The United Kingdom then signalled its intent to harness AI innovation to ‘underpin future prosperity’, through an ‘AI Sector deal’, widely promoted by respective government PR teams. A UK government policy paper, co-authored by Facebook’s Vice President of AI, equated the transformative power of AI to that of the medieval printing press (UK Government, 2018):

The huge global opportunity AI presents is why the industrial strategy white paper identified AI and data as 1 of 4 Grand Challenges – in which the UK can lead the world for years to come. [...] The UK is well placed to do this. We are already home to some of the biggest names in the business [...] We need to be strategic ... focusing on the areas where we can compete globally. [...] A revolution in AI is already emerging. If we act now, we can lead it from the front. (UK Government, 2018)

Through its co-authorship of the policy paper, Facebook received the UK government’s tacit endorsement of its AI business interests, as well as a platform to voice particular truths about AI technologies. European countries have also displayed AI ambitions, as have cities and regions. The EU pledged €1.5 billion to AI during 2018–2020; France pledged the same amount to French businesses until 2022 (Sloane, 2018). Germany has invested in a new ‘Cyber Valley’, while the Mayor of London has set out the city’s stall as ‘the AI capital of Europe’ (Mayor of London, 2018: 5).

Numerous vested interests – institutional investors, investment banks, tech companies, management consultancies and advisory firms – have employed PR to campaign for a future shaped by AI. Expert status, ample resources and geographic reach give these firms a booming corporate voice in the AI race. Many are global organisations with large, well-resourced communications teams, able to invest hundreds of millions in sustained AI thought leadership activity, including white papers, surveys and reports. Global firms are able to generate their ‘big ideas’ about AI internally. These big ideas are developed and distilled by analysts and technical writers, distributed and curated by PR specialists and sales people, and endorsed by company spokespeople at senior levels (Bourne, 2017). The largest of these firms can also tailor their thought leadership to different economic sectors and geographic regions, helping ideas about AI to circulate and gain traction with policymakers and business leaders around the world (Bourne, 2017).

PR’s remit in this global competition is to ensure that big ideas about AI become trustworthy as they are disseminated, so as to dispel any cynicism lingering from AI’s previous cycles of ‘boom and bust’³ (House of Lords, 2018). Thus, the AI ‘space race’ follows the standard neoliberal playbook for national competitiveness campaigns, in which promotional messages are designed to ‘*frighten, enthuse and differentiate* the chosen audience’ (Davies, 2014: 141). Thought leadership produced by global management consultancies is particularly adept at combining all three sets of messages. For example, Accenture, in one of its reports, cautioned policy makers and business leaders to ‘avoid missing out’ on a future with AI, combining this message of fear with unbridled enthusiasm for AI’s potential as a capital–labour hybrid, destined to transform the way we conceive growth (Purdy and Daugherty, 2016). In another report, Accenture’s South African office urged local companies to put AI at the heart of organisational strategy. More

ominously, South African companies were urged to reinvent their HR departments as 'HAIR' or 'Human and AI Resources' (Accenture, 2017: 18).

While management consultancies have fairly viscous time horizons, venture capital firms face more urgent tensions. The venture capital business model involves buying start-up companies, whipping them into shape, then cashing out of their company investments, or 'exiting', typically after 5 years or more. Nearly 140 AI-associated companies were acquired by venture capital between 2011 and 2017 (Peet and Wilde, 2017). This puts venture capital firms under pressure to make AI start-ups look good to prospective buyers and investors. Here, PR plays a vital role in 'pump-priming' the market by drumming up excitement in the prospect of 'hidden treasures' waiting to be extracted through investing in AI companies. Thus, venture capital firms have contributed substantially to AI hype – stirring up media excitement in everything from drones to driverless cars, from travel to dating apps, as well as supposedly unassailable benefits from AI health applications in fighting cancer and saving lives.

So, what are the implications of AI national competitiveness for PR's Arendtian promise of voice? Couldry (2010) argues that neoliberal rationality shapes the organisation of space, where some spaces 'become prioritised, while others fall out of use', thus neoliberalism 'literally changes where we can and cannot speak and be heard' (p. 12). And while neoliberalism valorises the consumer to the point of *sounding* like a celebration of voice for regular citizens (Couldry, 2010), the AI 'space race' illustrates just how much *wholesale* markets employ PR to prioritise spaces for communication between elites. Thus, PR plays an active role in protecting the spaces and silos where elite voices act in concert, to the detriment of other stakeholder voices affected by resulting decisions (Bourne, 2017). For example, when Accenture promotes advice to companies on improving HR and managing 'talent', the firm is not at all concerned with employee voice; it is wholly focused on plying consultancy services to management.

Second, while PR may appear to be building generalised trust in AI, in reality, PR exists to represent *competing* interests. This means that for every customised AI application promoted by one company, there will be a competing interest deploying PR to undermine it – or simply promote a 'better' product or patent instead. This confuses the AI landscape, making it difficult for either wholesale clients or retail consumers to separate good AI products from bad. Finally, as with every neoliberal disruption, AI will inevitably produce its global winners and losers. The largest AI campaigns are being waged on behalf of the most developed economies. Ultimately, AI's biggest losers will be small and developing nations, which lack the resources and infrastructure to participate equally in, and benefit from, a new AI-led economy.

Promoting 'friendly' AI: Consumer trust

For AI to be naturalised as the new common-sense way of life, PR must also win over consumers. Many businesses use social media as a means of engaging with consumers, and have now embraced AI chatbots as a cost-effective means of building personal, social connections with consumers. AI chatbots play an increasing role in organisational communication, optimising and tailoring messages with current and potential followers (Neff and Nagy, 2016). PR's approach to naturalising AI into consumers' everyday lives

often involves making AI communications either ‘fun’ or helpful, or both. For instance, in advance of the Season 7 premiere of *Game of Thrones*, HBO launched its ‘GoTBot’ to chat with fans wanting to refresh their memory on key characters and plotlines (Farokhmanesh, 2017). Just Eat, the online food ordering company, launched its chatbot in 2016. A year later, more than 40,000 people had used the bot, with customers able to start a dialogue simply by posting a pizza emoji (Spanier, 2017).

While more companies now use AI tools to support existing communications teams or to manage all social media communication, the PR industry chooses not to see this activity as a direct threat. After all, PR-bots still lack the nuance to navigate thorny reputational issues or to recognise a crisis (Wilson et al., 2017). PR also expects to continue protecting its jurisdiction, since PR practitioners rely heavily on the ‘chemistry’ they establish with clients and/or senior management (Pieczka, 2006). Yet ‘chemistry’ is a tenuous professional barrier. Since neoliberal thinking drives many client-organisations, they may regard PR-bots as a compelling proposition for their sheer efficiency: PR-bots can work 24/7, occupy many global spaces instantaneously, and provide ‘just-in-time’ message response to the media and the public. For consumers, the real problem with friendly PR-bots is that the human touch they offer is just an illusion. You think you’re getting truly personalised service, when you’re simply getting cheaper service. Friendly PR-bots have real implications for voice in neoliberalism’s next phase. We place ourselves in a vulnerable position when dealing with bots, since we must trust them to some extent by giving up our personal data to them (Kember, 2002). Bots use our trust to promote purchases, garner votes, build desires and so on (Donath, 2019). However, while bots may imitate emotion, they cannot *feel* it (Moore, 2018). Thus PR-friendly bots have their downside, especially if – one day – bots use ‘peer pressure’ to influence voice, as Donath warns:

Think of the social pressure once you have three Alexas⁴ in the room, and they are all chatting and friendly, and they all really like this political candidate, and you – well, you are not sure. But you like them, and when you express your doubts, they glance at each other, and you wonder if they had been talking about you among themselves, and then they look at you, a bit disappointed. (Donath, 2019: 21)

Our chief vulnerability with voice lies in forgetting that bots mask human agency. As economic anthropologist, Brett Scott (2016), points out, a company does not address itself as ‘I’ in its regular correspondence to you. But PR-bots will do exactly that, allowing us to think we are talking to corporations in the first person, when what we are really doing is the opposite. We could become lulled into thinking that trustworthy bots mean trustworthy companies. Businesses that are renowned for poor service could hide behind friendly PR bot-led communication, while removing much-needed services even faster than ever (Bourne, 2018). PR-bots could become an important means of protecting spaces for the powerful, allowing corporate elites to retreat from meaningful interaction with customers and other stakeholders, while giving the public the *impression* of voice (Moore, 2018).

Promoting inequality: Denying voice

There is an even darker side to social interaction with PR-bots; their designers are just as capable of creating *unfriendly* bots too. Malicious propaganda-bots are designed to

manipulate credibility, spread and amplify fake news and propaganda, and build *mis-trust*. PR scholarship once envisaged the Internet as a means of reinvigorating the public sphere, and providing opportunities for voice and democracy (Collister, 2016; Motion et al., 2016). Instead, the polarising effect of malicious bot campaigns has suppressed opposition, silencing many voices who no longer feel their political views are widely shared (Diakopoulos, 2018; McStay, 2018).

The PR industry prefers to see its role as largely distanced from such dark arts. Yet, Bell Pottinger, the international PR firm, was notoriously brought down by a malicious Twitterbot campaign it instigated to subvert South African political discourse (Finlay, 2018). Edwards (2015) suggests PR's head-in-the-sand approach is hardly new: 'For all its claims to dialogue, relationship-building and two-way communication, PR's roots have a markedly undemocratic element to them, contributing to the different systems that devalued "other" voices and frequently prevented them from being heard at all' (p. 25). Edwards' observation has new resonance for AI, PR and voice, in respect of programmed inequalities as a human rights issue (Noble, 2018).

AI works with, and learns from, Internet algorithms, which activists have argued are fundamentally biased, principally towards race (Noble, 2018). Despite Google and other search engines' positioning as trusted public resources, Noble (2018) contends these platforms prioritise racist content because it is highly profitable. She argues that AI-led algorithms on these platforms continually reproduce bias, for example, by presenting pornographic images in response to keyword searches such as 'black girls' (Noble, 2018). In this sense, the supposed neoliberal futurity of AI discourses in reality looks to the past by locking in old prejudices. Sexism, racism and bias have emerged in AI programmes designed to police criminal activity, recruit employees and issue loans (Cossins, 2018; Eubanks, 2017). Noble (2018) critiques the neoliberal ideology behind such AI-driven programmes, which make dehumanisation 'a legitimate free-market technology project' (p. 31). She describes AI-bias as a clear indicator that neoliberalism is creating 'new conditions and demands on social relations so as to open new markets' (Noble, 2018: 91). Noble concludes that bias in AI and automation should be a wake-up call for people living in the margins. It should *also* be a wake-up call for the PR profession. PR has, for too long, obscured the voices and experiences of audiences who do not immediately fit organisational objectives, particularly where the objective is profit (Edwards, 2015).

Conclusion: Voice and influence in AI discourses

In this closing section, I return to Couldry's (2010) proposition that to deny anyone her capacity for narrative, her potential for voice, 'is to deny a basic dimension of human life' (p. 7). I have shown throughout this article that PR's links with neoliberalism are conflicted at best. On one hand, as neoliberal democracies appear evacuated of true democratic content, PR *promises voice* to the public 'to engage as consumers or stakeholders in debates and to impact on decisions and issues they consider significant ... PR promises that the public will be heard' (Cronin, 2018: 54). On the other hand, PR's contemporary practice has emerged hand-in-hand with the neoliberal project. Much of contemporary PR seems designed to privilege the voice of corporate and business

interests, often at the expense of other stakeholder voices. Even more worrying is the tone adopted by senior PR consultants speaking in industry forums, insisting on PR's duty to remain relentlessly optimistic as they shape AI discourses (e.g. Hari's, 2018, column in *PR Week*).

Such pronouncements restrict voice and shut down dissent within the PR profession itself, and in all societal communication shaped by PR practice. This is why, if PR aspires to be ethical in practice, then AI's programmed inequalities – towards race, gender and identities – is a clear-and-present crisis of voice and must become *the* urgent challenge for PR. The PR profession must forge new expertise in discerning a digital landscape in which humans are *already* differentiated by elite versus marginalised positions, via biased AI protocols (Noble, 2018). PR researchers have an important role to play here in re-mapping existing work on diversity in PR (e.g. Daymon and Demetrious, 2014; Edwards, 2015; Tindall and Waters, 2013; Waymer, 2013) onto the current debates surrounding PR and AI, with renewed interpretations of what intersectionality and power relations might mean in AI discourses (see Noble, 2018).

AI platforms are not 'neutral' technologies, their design is purposeful, exhibiting bias and eroding human rights (Noble, 2018). These are spaces that PR must intervene in, if the profession truly commits to voice as value (Couldry, 2010). However, PR cannot do so when the profession does not represent society. As long as poor diversity (class, race, gender, etc.) persists in the PR profession, then PR's continued promotion of AI can only perpetuate neoliberalism's crisis of voice.

Finally, if *all* voices matter (Couldry, 2010), then PR must 'challenge the distance' that neoliberal logic instals between marginalised voices and those who possess the practical resources and symbolic status to command a platform for recognition. An ethical PR practice must avoid giving the public the *impression* of voice, while allowing corporate elites to use AI facades to retreat from meaningful interactions. An ethical PR must further commit to transparency, by specifying the human agency behind AI-led communications. The profession needs to engage with and actively value dissenting voices offering resistance to dominant AI discourses. To do so would mean ending PR's tradition of unquestioned support for the neoliberal project, recognising that neoliberalism's progress for some, repeatedly brings lasting disruption for others.


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Notes

1. A reference to 'TINA' or 'There Is No Alternative', an expression used by 19th-century liberals, and later by 20th-century neoliberal exponents.
2. The Fourteenth Amendment was intended to protect the personhood of newly freed blacks. See Logan (2018).
3. Notably in the 1960s–1970s and again in the 1980s. See UK House of Lords Report (2018).
4. 'Alexa' is Amazon's virtual assistant, able to control other 'smart' devices in the home or office.

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