

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations*  
*Paul H. Alvarez – 1995*

“Let’s begin with an experiment, Close your eyes, and imagine yourself in a strange land. Imagine you are in Bosnia. Imagine you are a Muslim living in an area controlled by Serbian forces. As a Muslim, you are frequently harassed by Serbian troops. You are searched, even if you are just standing on a street corner talking with your friends. You are stopped in traffic and forced out of your car. You have friends or acquaintances that have fared even worse. Some have been arrested – even beaten.

Then imagine you hear the news that a prominent Bosnian Muslim has been arrested for murder. This person is a celebrity and an entertainer, but the Serbians arrest him and accuse him of killing his wife. The man is no saint, and you know he has been unfaithful and abusive. But he is one of your people, and the Serbs have arrested him.

The man stands trial, and the evidence is presented. The Serbs say they found incriminating evidence, such as bloodstained clothing in his house. There is no murder weapon, but there is motive – jealousy. You also know that one of the men arrested the defendant was notorious for hating Muslims and using his authority to harass and intimidate them. How would you feel about this case? Would you be willing to give the defendant the benefit of the doubt? How credible would the evidence be, in light of your own personal experience?

Now, let’s move this scenario to South Africa. Let’s assume you are a black South African and white police officers had arrested a fellow black. Which side would you believe?

What about Northern Ireland? What if you were a Catholic in Belfast, and the case involved another Catholic arrested by Protestant police or even British troops? Whose version would you accept?

Let’s stop at one last destination. What if you were an African-American in southern California, and the defendant in question was O.J. Simpson? Which side would be more credible? Just as important – which side would you want to win? Which side would you hope wins?

It’s time to open our eyes. I have used this experiment to set the stage for my discussion. Of course, the real focus of my experiment is the last scenario, the O.J. Simpson trial. As a communicator, I was very disturbed by that trial. I’m not here to offer an analysis of the evidence, nor can I presume to comment on the justice of the verdict. What I can discuss is the shocking truth revealed when the jury announced its verdict.

Let’s think back to that moment. What were you doing when the decision was announced? You may have been watching it live, along with millions of other Americans. What was your reaction when you heard the decisions? Did you react differently from those around you? And what about the people who were with you when you heard the verdict? Were they all like you – the same race, age, sex?

The important point is not the O.J. verdict itself. What is important is the fact the Americans could react so differently to it. The image that haunts me – and should haunt us all – was the TV news shot of those law students at Howard University. The black students literally jumped for joy, while the white students next to them sat in stunned silence. How can we account for such a radical difference in reaction? How could people from the same country, speaking the same language and

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sharing the same legal tradition watch the same trial, hear the same evidence, and yet perceive it so differently?

Paul Homes, the editor of Inside PR, offered a thoughtful explanation in a recent editorial. He wrote, “White America viewed this story through a prism of reality in which African-American males commit the majority of violent crimes, in which the law enforcement community despite a few rotten apples – exists primarily to protect the public, and in which science and reason must prevail.

Black America, on the other hand, viewed the same story through a prism of reality in which African-Americans are routinely accused of crimes they did not commit, police officers think nothing of planting evidence and perjuring themselves in order to gain a conviction, and modern science – to which the black community has little access – is used to confuse and mislead.”

What Holmes is saying is that whites believe they are living in America, while blacks believe they are in Bosnia, or South Africa or Ulster, where nearly every perception is tainted by bitter history and personal experience.

Perception should be our focus. You have heard many colleagues and professors talk about using public relations and advertising to convey messages. But how are those messages perceived? If perception is reality, then we must ask ourselves some fundamental questions about what Americans see when they watch, what they hear when they listen, and what they understand when they read.

The issue goes far beyond race. I use the O.J. verdict only as the most dramatic example of a much broader phenomenon.

America is becoming a fractured society. We are a house divided – by race, by culture, by ethnicity, by gender, by class and by age. To a certain extent, this is admirable. As Americans, we pride ourselves on diversity. Isn't that why our dollar bill has the motto, E Pluribus Unum – One out of many? It also represents a significant opportunity for communicators, especially in public relations. We need to reflect on those opportunities.

But we must also consider the dark side of the force. I fear that America is heading to a destiny beyond diversity. We are in danger of moving toward serious, potentially violent social divisions – E Pluribus Chaos.

Modern communications techniques and technologies are, to a certain extent, responsible for this division – at the very least, they are widening the fissures, rather than healing them. We face a curious paradox: at the same time that Americans can talk to each other with unprecedented ease and freedom, they seem less willing to listen to one another.

Managing this fragmentation will become the most important challenge for the next generation of public relations and advertising professionals. As we look at the new world that awaits us, we must

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weigh the opportunities and the risks. We must understand our responsibilities toward our profession and our society.

What do I mean by fragmentation? What is causing it? Any student of advertising, marketing, or public relations knows about demographics. We target our ad buys or our media placements to reach consumers of a specific age or income or gender. We choose our media outlets according to readership or audience preference. From the dawn of time, communicators have sought out their most receptive viewers, listeners, or readers.

Segmentation is nothing new. What is new is a powerful media explosion during the past decade. Not only is there more media, it's more specialized and much more fragmented. When I was growing up, there were only three national TV networks. Actually, there were only two until ABC came along. Most houses had just one TV. That meant the entire family sat around the tube and watched the same programming. Children and adults alike would see everything from Davey Crockett to Playhouse 90. We were like campers keeping warm by the same fire. And as we were watching our TV, so were millions of other households.

This was the golden age of mass media. Advertisers could reach practically the entire country and at relatively little cost per consumer. Public relations professionals who placed their clients or stories on national TV had a giant, captive audience. An interview with Edward R. Murrow on "You Are There" was like winning the Super Bowl.

Print media was similar. In addition to the local paper, publications such as the New York Times, Life and Time magazine became the arbiters of the news. Powerful editors like Henry Luce helped set the nation's agenda. Any politician, business leader or private organization that wanted national visibility had to be let through by powerful media gatekeepers.

The result was a mass consumer culture and period of assimilation. For example, my father was fluent in both Spanish and Portuguese, yet English was the only language spoken in our household. We wanted to be Americanized.

Come to think of it, even the way long-settled Americans speak the language – the idioms and pronunciation we use – has been shaped by the mass media of this century. Before talking pictures or radio, how would someone in Oklahoma or Maine know what standard American English sounded like? I guess they'd have to visit Indiana.

This system had one major problem – it was very exclusive. It was not accessible to vast groups of people, unless they had the money to get on the air or in print. The media talked to people. And it didn't really speak to everybody, particularly African-Americans. When we watched TV, we saw women wearing evening dresses in the kitchen. All Hispanics wore sombreros, Japanese were either gardeners or Kamikaze pilots, and Native Americans got shot off horses. American's diversity was held in check.

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That began to change during the '70s, when programming and advertising adapted to a new consciousness. We still had a mass media, but we were trying to integrate it and make its images more diverse and realistic.

Then the early '80s brought a different kind of change. A new technology arose, creating a radically different media environment. Cable television and satellite broadcasting brought greater choice to the media consumer. The result would be a consumer empowerment and a gradual shift from mass media to personalized programming.

Back when Ronald Reagan began his presidency, fewer than 20 percent of American households had cable television. By the middle of the decade, that percentage had doubled. Today, more than 60 percent of all households have cable.

The ultimate vision of the information superhighway is a network much larger than anything currently available. Through fiber optic cables, people will be able to contact one another directly, sending information, gossip and videos that they generate themselves. There will be no gatekeepers – no editors to sift the truth from the rumor.

You can see what's happening. Everyone will have his own TV, watch his own-segmented programming, read his own special-interest newsletters and magazines, and "chat" on the computer with like-minded hackers. On the one hand, it's an exhilarating prospect – an unprecedented personal freedom. But it also poses a risk – an isolation of thought and experience that ultimately threatens the American Dialogue.

Roger Wright of the New Republic refers to this as "information networks catering to distinct communities to reinforce pre-existing beliefs." He argues that "the ever-dropping cost of sending data – print, video, audio – means that distinct communities, however, small, have more and more data conduits devoted to them, and thus find it easier and easier to ignore the outside sources." He cites the recent debate on Quebec's referendum to secede from Canada. The Internet had one web site for separatists and another for federalists. People from each side went to their respective web sites, where they reinforces their own arguments, rather than engage the other side in argument.

Such polarization is happening in the United States. White supremacists are seeking out sympathetic colleagues and sharing information on making bombs. On the other side of the spectrum, left-wing activists are using the net to plan boycotts of companies and disrupt their business. This all can be done without any attempt at a dialogue or debate with people of opposing viewpoints. Anyone who disagrees risks getting "flamed."

This capability is more disturbing in light of a research report that Roper starch conducted last year. They found that Americans distrust government officials more than ever. Well over half feel their elected leaders act out of self-interest rather than serve the public good. The majority of Americans feel the same way toward journalist, newspapers and TV news broadcasters. They don't trust traditional media sources.

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The Roper Starch survey offers a sobering view of America's attitude toward basic social institutions. As fear of crime increase, the number of Americans who say they are optimistic about the institutions of marriage and the family has dropped 12 points in just three years. Corporate downsizing and the white-collar recession also give Americans pause, instilling a sense of betrayal and crippling traditional career models.

As the report states, the rallying cry of commitment in the early '60s was JFK's "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." In the 1990s the best we can do is Rodney King's pathetic plea, "Can't we all get along?"

This doesn't mean that Americans are losing their ideals. But most people now rank themselves ahead of the President or Congress as the champion of the public interest. Likewise, they consider self-reliance the true guarantor of economic prosperity.

The American melting pot is cracking. Interest, ethnic and political groups are isolating themselves from one another. This endangers the balance of American democracy. In the past, people spoke of America's ideological pendulum winging back and forth, always gravitating toward the center. Modern commentators might refer to a sine wave, snaking across a constant line. In either case, an ultimate balance is achieved.

Today, we are in danger of splitting the pendulum in two, with each side permanently repelled from the center. Instead of a sine wave, we could have parallel lines, stretching out indefinitely.

In such an environment, people will find it impossible to agree upon, or even discuss, a lot more than just the O.J. Verdict. They will create their own "prisms of reality" and their own perceptions reinforcing prejudices and excluding all dissent.

The power of technology is leading us to what Lawrence Grossman, former head of NBC, calls the "electronic republic." People will rely less on their elected representatives and "vote" virtually instantly through polls and computer-enhanced pressure groups. With no media elite to act as a gatekeeper, public passion and misinformation can spread with the speed of light. As communication professionals – past, present, future – we have a responsibility to mitigate this fragmentation as much as possible. We understand fragmented audiences and media. We target our key public and deliver customized messages that people will understand and act upon. We must use that understanding to establish contact with every segment of our society. We must learn how to communicate persuasively with every racial, ethnic and cultural group. At Ketchum Public Relations, we reach out to minorities through our African-American affiliate, the Morrison Group, and our Hispanic affiliate, Ketchum Asociados. Each has great experience in communicating to these critical audiences. There's a lot more involved here than just placing a standard ad in Jet magazine or translating a news release from English to Spanish. If you want your messages to have any impact you have to adapt them to the experiences and cultural backgrounds of each audience.

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If traditional gatekeepers are not relevant in the new media, then we should step in and assume that role. Through Internet web sites and home pages – both our agencies and our clients – we can offer places for reliable information and constructive discussion. Ketchum has done this through its own home page on theirs designed for a number of clients. An example is the MGD Tap Room – a virtual “pub” sponsored by Miller Genuine Draft. Most of the visitors are young people interested in chatting about sports or fashion issues of the day. The MGD Tap Room offers a tolerant setting which to share their interests and views. Others businesses and community organizations have such websites. Many do already. This can be a healthy trend, especially if we promote them among wider circles of Internet users.

I also think we have a responsibility in the kind of messages we generate. After last year’s elections, Ketchum spoke out against negative campaign advertising with a full-page ad in the New York Times.

The title of the ad was “Don’t Call It Advertising,” and we argued that personal assaults and mudslinging had no place in a responsible public debate. That’s a message we need to remember as we enter the 1996 presidential campaign.

I received 2,000 letters in response to the ad. The reaction was overwhelmingly favorable. Those who criticized our position argued that negative campaigning was not new to the electronic age and that it was protected right under the First Amendment.

Granted, Thomas Jefferson’s critics called him a mulatto in the press, and Andrew Jackson was labeled an adulterer. But that represented the discourse of an age when American was young and still deeply divided by class and race. We should know better now. And while we don’t need to abridge the right of free speech, we do need to speak out against its abuse. That, too, is a protected right.

We also should engage our skills in the cause of mutual cooperation. We need to celebrate our diversity and promote the integration and assimilation of all races, classes and cultures. Agencies and corporations can do this in their communities. Ketchum’s Los Angeles office is spearheading the promotional campaign to restore that community’s image and self-esteem in the wake of riots and natural disasters several years ago. At our headquarters in Pittsburgh, Ketchum Public Relations worked with the Urban League and local TV stations to foster community spirit and volunteerism in a unique program entitled “It Takes a Whole Community to Raise a Child.”

Academic institutions, such as Ball State, also can make a major contribution. You can foster the study of communications among the various segments of America’s fractured society. We look to you for ideas about how we can use the tools for public relations to reverse the trend toward isolation, ignorance and intolerance.

These are just some suggestions that come to my mind. Perhaps you can think of better ones. My career in public relations and advertising has taught me on thing for sure: Communications is an awesome force for change.

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We, here, understand that power better than most. We appreciate the barriers that people can erect and the methods required to break those barriers down. We need to apply knowledge to harness the power of communication and get people to listen to one another, not just themselves.

As communicators, we can help America celebrate its diversity rather than fear it. We can use our skills to encourage dialogue, instead of diatribe. And we can help give reign to what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.”

That’s quite a mission. Can we succeed? The jury is still out. Nevertheless, we should begin tonight, and look for the day when all Americans – of all races and classes and cultures – can close their eyes, imagine life in the U.S.A, and see the very same picture.”