



PAAC

E-News

Public Affairs: Your Online Newsletter

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[President's message](#)

BlackBerry Thumb, Marshall McLuhan and Frankenstein



by Chris Benedetti
PAAC President

I think I'm getting BlackBerry Thumb. I'm not sure, but like many of us in this business, I had better be careful. We live and work in a world of runaway technology, so it behooves us to spare a moment to think about the proliferation of technological tools, and whether they serve us or we serve them.

What they call BlackBerry Thumb is the newest and trendiest malady: A repetitive strain injury from endlessly thumbing the keypads of our BlackBerry electronic marvels as we strive to waste not one minute of our workday. There are always incoming messages to read and respond to, usually from other people who are also welded to their BlackBerries. And even in these Dog Days of Summer, it seems there is too much to do in too little time, which is why gadgets are taking over our lives.

The future isn't what it used to be

It was never supposed to be this way. Decades ago, people who claimed to be futurists gazed into whatever they used for a crystal ball and predicted that technology would set us free. The star of the sixties was Marshall McLuhan, remember him? Today it's possible to look up his old quotes on an Internet he never envisioned, like this quote from a 1964 magazine interview, and be amused:

"The cities, corporate extensions of our physical organs, are withering...New York, Chicago, Los Angeles - all will disappear like the dinosaur. The automobile, too, will soon be as obsolete as the cities it is currently strangling, replaced by new antigravitational technology. The marketing systems and the stock market as we know them today will soon be dead as the dodo, and automation will end the traditional concept of the job, replacing it with a role, and giving men the breath of leisure..."

Well...I don't know how that anti-gravity machine is coming along, but the leisure society seems increasingly less likely to appear. New York, Chicago and L.A. are doing fine - choking on cars but hanging in nicely - as are Toronto, Vancouver and all the rest. All the time that our gadgets save us has been translated into new demands on us to do more work, not opportunities to play, which is why we use breaks between meetings to answer to our new masters, the BlackBerries.

McLuhan and others mislead us because they mislead themselves. They failed to understand the essence of the corporate mind. When computer word-processing took over the modern office, some people said it would eliminate the use of paper, but instead we print everything in hard copy to cover ourselves. Similarly, the BlackBerry generated an imperative for us to use every moment to work, lest we fall behind in the corporate race.

Safer than cell phones

Well, at least BlackBerries are safer than cell phones. We are now told it's best to cut down on the use of cell phones, because medical experts fear they cause brain tumors as we hold their electronic signal up to our heads.

From the vantage point of 2005 - the real 2005, not the one we used to see in the movies - Marshall McLuhan was wrong about technology. Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*, may have been closer to the truth.

And I think I'm getting BlackBerry Thumb.

•••

Please join me in welcoming the following new members to PAAC:

- Ashley McClinton, Retail Council of Canada
- Lewis Reford, Conservative Party of Canada

- Cynthia Ross, Toronto Community Housing Corporation
- Bernie Morton, Sussex Strategy Group

As always, feel free to contact me with ideas, suggestions and input, at cbenedetti@sussex-strategy.com.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Benedetti', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

[*Photo feature*](#)

Our 2005 summer social event

July 14, 2005 was the evening of the PAAC Social, held this year at the Pilot Tavern, 22 Cumberland St. in downtown Toronto. It was a chance to socialize informally with colleagues in a cozy pub atmosphere with refreshments, snacks and conversation. Of course, every once in a while some guy fired off a digital camera in there...



Welcome back my friends - Above, PAAC President Chris Benedetti, in an informal mood, welcomes colleagues to the Social. Below, he chats with Rick Hall of Rick Hall PR.





Food groups: Beer and deep-fried - Above: Alex Gill goes after the deep-fried calamari while Graham Murray (background, with Chris Benedetti) gives a pointer. Below: Graham chats with Victoria Hunt, GR Director for the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, while a pint and some nachos await.





Here's lookin' at ya - Above, Derek Leebosh demonstrates the art of balanced dining, with a beer in one hand and spicy wings in the other. Below, Elaine Flis and Joe MacDonald take in the ambience at The Pilot. If you weren't there, you should have been!



[Event photos](#)

Talking of Toronto, but off the record

On Monday July 18, our off-the-record panel discussion at the Sutton Place Hotel attracted some high-profile politicians to the luncheon along with PAAC members, to hear our blue-ribbon panel consider the topic: *New Powers for the City of Toronto*.

The session was moderated by former Toronto Mayor and long-time activist John Sewell. The panel consisted of Toronto Councillor Case Ootes, Cecil Bradley, Vice President of the Toronto Board of Trade, and David Zimmer, MPP and Parliamentary Secretary to the Attorney General. David Pecaut, Chair of the Toronto City Summit Alliance, didn't make it for reasons that were unavoidable.



Former Toronto Mayor John Sewell moderated.

At issue was the new City of Toronto Act, scheduled to be unveiled this fall but still under construction as the panel discussion took place. First up was Councillor Case Ootes, who laid out the background on Toronto's size and importance as a revenue generator for Ontario and for Canada.



Councillor Case Ootes laid out the facts.

Ootes also recapped for the audience the structure of the city's government, with its major crowd of 44 councillors led by a mayor who has only his own vote and the prestige of office to work with.

The panel session was off the record, to encourage a full and frank exchange of views, so we cannot report details of the ensuing discussion. However, it wasn't a secret, so we have background and pictures.



Your table is ready - Above, York-Simcoe MP Peter van Loan (left) in conversation with Conservative Finance Critic Monte Solberg, at the PAAC luncheon. Below: Panel member

David Zimmer (left) caught by the camera with PAAC Director Brian Litman.



Ootes, known for his long service to his Toronto constituents, spoke very bluntly about issues confronting the city. Former Mayor Sewell presided over the session expertly, seeming friendly and chipper and becoming more so as the discussions progressed. Bradley, who came equipped with a full PowerPoint slide presentation, was clearly pleased to be there and to have his say.

The closing point belonged to Sewell, who urged PAAC members who were present to write up and talk up the issues confronting Toronto, in hopes of impacting the government as it prepares the new Act.



John Sewell makes a point with panel member Cecil Bradley. Were they talking cities or soup? Sorry, it was off the record.

[Guest column](#)

Message discipline leads to a series of unfortunate events

by Chanchal Bhattacharya
Department of Political Science,
York University

Everyone who deals directly with the news media is taught the importance of message discipline as a tool to ensure that the intended message gets to the public. But does this set up a series of unfortunate events leading to a loss of credibility? Consider this excerpt, as reported in *Editor & Publisher*, of an exchange between ABC News chief White House correspondent Terry Moran and White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan:

MORAN: Scott, is the insurgency in Iraq in its 'last throes'?

McCLELLAN: Terry, you have a desperate group of terrorists in Iraq that are doing everything they can to try to derail the transition to democracy. The Iraqi people have made it clear that they want a free and democratic and peaceful future. And that's why we're doing everything we can, along with other countries, to support the Iraqi people as they move forward-

MORAN: But the insurgency is in its last throes?

McCLELLAN: The Vice President talked about that the other day. You have a desperate group of terrorists who recognize how high the stakes are in Iraq. A free Iraq will be a significant blow to their ambitions.

MORAN: But they're killing more Americans, they're killing more Iraqis. That's the last throes?

McCLELLAN: Innocent - I say innocent civilians. And it doesn't take a lot of people to cause mass damage when you're willing to strap a bomb onto yourself, get in a car and go and attack innocent civilians. That's the kind of people that we're dealing with. That's what I say when we're talking about a determined enemy.

MORAN: Right. What is the evidence that the insurgency is in its last throes?

McCLELLAN: I think I just explained to you the desperation of terrorists and their tactics.

MORAN: What's the evidence on the ground that it's being extinguished?

McCLELLAN: Terry, we're making great progress to defeat the terrorist and regime elements. You're seeing Iraqis now playing more of a role in addressing the security threats that they face. They're working side by side with our coalition forces. They're working on their own. There are a lot of special forces in Iraq that are taking the battle to the enemy in Iraq. And so this is a period when they are in a desperate mode.

MORAN: Well, I'm just wondering what the metric is for measuring the defeat of the insurgency.

McCLELLAN: Well, you can go back and look at the Vice President's remarks. I think he talked about it.

And so it went. This is a pretty clear example of message discipline taken to a ludicrous extent. But this is exactly what every media trainer teaches politicians, public officials, and media spokespeople to do. To a significant extent, message discipline means a single-minded focus on articulating a specific, pre-conceived message regardless of how the interview goes.

Today's news reporting relies on sound bites and quotations not presented in their original context, but in the context of the reporter's story frame. Message discipline minimizes the degree to which reporters can do this, and ensures that the person interviewed gets their packaged message across because that's all there is for the reporter to use. While journalists find this frustrating, it is a direct consequence of their practice of imposing their own story frames which often misrepresent the meaning of what the people being interviewed are trying

to say.

Further, much as the media objects to being managed by strategies like this, they often destroy the public credibility and reputations of those who do not practice these techniques. Journalistic protests against spin-doctoring and media management can amount to ruses to draw out those sufficiently foolish to imagine that being open and genuine will result in fair coverage.

In effect, the media engages in a very public and brutal form of Darwinian selection: Their reporting can humiliate those who practice the kind of openness they claim to prize, and advance the interests of those who practice the techniques they so overtly deplore. The result: Ultimately, the media ensures that only those who practice the very behaviours they denounce can survive in the public arena. Like guileful predators, they lament the defensive efforts of their prey, then eat those foolish enough to believe their protests.

While message discipline is the mantra in political or public organizations for reasons of survival, in the long term it undermines the credibility of both the message and the messenger. It does not amount to progress in public communication. It's a situation where a series of rational actions leads to irrational outcomes, i.e., public affairs people stick to the message just to get it across against all that tendentious questioning, and if the result is a lack of credibility, they can't help that. This is a classic instance of a 'prisoner's dilemma.'

But this is beginning to change. Research into public relations, media and political communication is gaining increased standing in university and corporate settings. This research tests and demystifies the knowledge underlying public relations and communication. It is revealing that what passes for conventional wisdom in public communication is often misleadingly incomplete, and sometimes simply wrong. That's a start.

What we need now are practitioners who grasp and thoughtfully integrate the implications of new communications research into strategies that are more well-considered, over the long term, for those confrontations with combative reporters.

It's something for all public affairs professionals to think about. What none of us can do, is ignore it.

Guest writer Chanchal Bhattacharya, of the Department of Political Science, York University, can be reached at bhattach@yorku.ca

[The Web Editor's corner](#)

Americans tolerate Canadian intolerance

by David Silburt

PAAC Web Editor

Carolyn Parrish, her hour come round once again, slouches toward Ottawa to be reborn. She is about to make a triumphant return to the Liberal party, and although many news reports said she was originally thrown out of caucus for her anti-American statements, that's not true. Her anti-Americanism was never the reason.

Yes, she did say she hates Americans, and yes, she did call them "those bastards." Yes, she did stomp on a George Bush doll. And yes, those things caused frowns among Liberals who understand that we need to get along with Americans. But the thing that earned Parrish the heave-ho was her saying publicly that Paul Martin and his cronies could go to Hell. If Martin takes her back, that's what he's forgiving. Not her bigotry against the U.S., which many of her colleagues might frown upon, but which they have always allowed.

She's not alone. Canadians who would be ashamed to reveal their negative attitudes toward other recognizable groups feel free to hate Americans out loud. Read certain Canadian newspapers with a careful eye, and you can find evidence of reporters assigned to cover American affairs who show an obvious, undisguised dislike for America in general and the current administration in particular.

It's too easy to find cheaply-motivated anti-Americanism here in Canada. Yet despite that, the attitude is not generally returned by Americans. I have a good friend in Denver who insists most Americans simply tolerate this, the way an indulgent adult will tolerate a friend's ill-mannered children. Similarly, in the course of trying to interest U.S. literary agents in sample material, I have often tactfully asked, "do you accept queries from Canadians?" And the answer has always been a surprised, "of course - why wouldn't we?" There is not the slightest hint of anti-Canadianism to be heard.

The expected American backlash against U.S. Muslims that many feared would happen in these terrorist-wary times has not occurred in any large degree, either. But the lack of backlash against Canadians is more surprising, because it would be easier for Americans to do. It would be more acceptable. Instead, our American friends seem to appreciate, for the most part, that our countries are closely connected and interdependent. They seem be willing to let the politicians settle political disagreements; people are still people and business is still business. Let's criticize our friends where we must, they seem to be saying, and still get along with them on a personal level, in a spirit of co-operation.

That's a fine, tolerant attitude Americans have toward us. We should strive to do as well toward them.

Have your say

We welcome member input, whether it's a letter to the editor, a story suggestion or a proposal for a guest column. Feel free to email your input or suggestions to us. All submissions for

publication on this site are subject to approval by the Editorial Board.

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