

# Strategic Communication and Public Relations in the Philosophy of Byung-Chul Han: A Pro-materialist Critique Against the Hypertrophy of Storytelling and the Destruction of the Public Sphere

*Comunicación estratégica y relaciones públicas en la filosofía de Byung-Chul Han: Una crítica promaterialista contra la hipertrofia del storytelling y la destrucción de la esfera pública*



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## Abstract:

This article takes a communicative approach to the work by Byung-Chul Han. The philosopher criticises how advertisers and organisations, through the incessant and abundant supply of information, have appropriated the public sphere by excessively emphasising storytelling. Han advocates for materialism, condemns the inflation of storytelling and suggests the need for message ecology to make the public sphere less distracting and more sustainable. The author highlights that Han

## Resumen:

*Este artículo realiza una aproximación a la obra de Byung-Chul Han desde el punto de vista comunicativo. El filósofo denuncia cómo los publicistas y las organizaciones, a través del suministro de información abundante y continua, se han apropiado de la esfera pública al enfatizar excesivamente el storytelling. Han reivindica el materialismo, condena la inflación del relato y sugiere la necesidad de una ecología de mensajes para hacer la esfera pública menos distractora y más sostenible. El*

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opens up new avenues for the development of the field of corporate communication and public relations by suggesting a novel concept of CSR that involves restricting message dissemination.

**Keywords:**

Public Relations; strategic communication; public sphere; storytelling.

*artículo expone que Han abre nuevos caminos para el desarrollo del campo de la comunicación empresarial y las relaciones públicas al sugerir un concepto de RSC novedoso que implica la restricción en la emisión de mensajes.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Relaciones públicas; comunicación estratégica; esfera pública; storytelling.*

## 1. Introduction

It is typical for books outside the realm of communication or marketing to describe public relations as an undesirable byproduct of capitalism. The term “spin doctor” is still used to label persuasive communicators who have no qualms about manipulating the masses for their own interests.

In *The Power Elite*, Wright Mills (1956) already blamed public relations for the de-ideologisation of society in the late 1950s, stating that “on the right and in the centre”, public relations, which can be hired, fulfil any need for ideology” (p. 330). Habermas (1991) directly accused public relations firms of disrupting the public sphere as a domain of discussion by “invading the process of public opinion by systematically creating or exploiting news events that attract attention” (193). Habermas (1991) spoke of the decline of the public sphere, understood as a citizen’s realm for deliberation on public affairs, and its transformation into a consumer space dominated by marketing and corporations. More recent books focusing on public relations’ role in shaping modern consumer society highlight its promotion of materialism, its service to the interests of large corporations and the conversion of citizens into consumers (Ewen, 1996; Tye, 2002). Edward Bernays considered the father of public relations, is consistently described as a manipulator and promoter of modern consumerism, “although most Americans had never heard of Edward L. Bernays, he had a profound impact on everything, from the products Americans purchased to the places they visited to the foods they ate for breakfast” (Tye, 2002, p. viii). In the most famous documentary about Bernays, titled *The Century of the Self* (Lessig, 2016), he is portrayed as a ruthless manipulator. The documentary cites Paul Mazur’s book *American Prosperity: Its Causes and Consequences (1928)* to illustrate the impact of the emerging public relations industry: “We must shift America from a needs to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old has been entirely consumed... Man’s desires must overshadow his needs” (Lessig, 2016). In another part of that book, Mazur (1928) holds the advertising industry responsible for this change, “advertising is an educational force. If effective, it increases desires, elevates the standard of living, and boosts consumption” (224).

In general, the history of public relations and advertising is based on a negative anthropology of human beings who struggle to reconcile their instincts with reality. The masters and ideologues of public relations, such as Bernays and Walter Lippmann, are described as Machiavellian figures who take advantage of human weaknesses. Lippmann, who collaborated on the World War I Propaganda Committee, is depicted as a defender of public relations to “tame and shape the minds of the masses to make sense of a world in which technology seemed out of control and the old order appeared to crumble” (Tye, 2002, p. 232).

In a more recent work, Morris and Goldsworthy (2008) also portray Lippmann as an expert in propaganda and a manipulator of consciences.

Public relations criticism has also emerged from academics working and teaching in the field. Postmodern Theory of Public Relations is based on the premise that power relations always exist between an organisation and its public, in which the former logically seeks to impose its hegemony and control over the latter (Holtzhausen, 2000; 2002). The postmodern approach is holistic and suggests that resistance and activism should be considered in the relationship between organisations and the public, “public relations must be understood and examined in a broader social, cultural, and political context rather than solely as a function of organisations” (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 95). This approach does not propose an entire amendment to the social role of advertising and public relations. Instead, it suggests that what is lacking is for the public to express conflict and dissent against organisations openly. Holtzhausen (2012) considers dissent more ethical than consensus by proposing a communicative paradigm that offers different perspectives instead of a single one that seeks to be imposed on the interlocutor. Since 2005, the Excellence Theory in Public Relations “indicates how public relations make organisations more efficient, how they should be organised to achieve this purpose, the ideal conditions organisations should have to be more effective, and how to measure the monetary value of public relations” (Grunig, 1992, p. 27). However, this theory is starting to be questioned as a normative ideal. Pieczka (2006) argues that public relations privilege the interests of the ruling classes. Furthermore, she criticises that the characteristics of dialogue are not interpersonal and that the professional management of an organisation’s relationships with its public does not generate affectivity (Pieczka, 2011). McNamara (2009) suggests that organisational communication remains too one-way and “does not adapt to the philosophy, culture, principles and practices that characterise the web” (p. 5). L’Etang (2008) also questions whether Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) serves any other purpose other than to control the will of the public and prevent them from being an obstacle to their plans.

The Critical Theory in Public Relations questions the lack of organisations’ sincerity in engaging with their audiences due to their desire to control and influence (McKie & Munshi, 2011; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; L’Etang, McKie, Snow & Xifra, 2016). This theory emerges as an alternative to the Excellence Theory and places audience activism at the centre of the strategic communication paradigm. Young (2016) considers that “public relations is central to activism” (p. 470). Munshi, Kurian and Xifra (2017) rebel against the fact that public relations has traditionally been aligned with elites by considering that there has been and should be a counterbalance between elites and non-elites.

We live in an attention economy in which attention is scarce (Falkinger, 2008; Franck, 2020). At the same time, we come from a public sphere degraded by the importance of commercial communication (Habermas, 1991). Han’s work is part of an intellectual tradition that has historically denounced the role played by public relations, specifically storytelling, as a contaminating and distracting element of the public sphere.

This article aims to review Han’s work for the first time from a public relations and strategic communication perspective, a field yet to be addressed in academic research. This study vindicates Han’s figure as part of a critical tradition in these two fields. The Korean-German philosopher argues in his writings that ecology should also be applied to the public sphere, not just the environment. According to Han, the public sphere has become consumed by messages due to the power of storytelling and digital communication, which multiplies the number of senders and information messages. This saturation would require a

restriction that allows activism and organisations that seek to position themselves in the field of sustainability to differentiate their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts.

### 1.1. *Byung-Chul Han*

Byung-Chul Han is one of the most popular philosophers in the world. His readership extends beyond the realm of philosophy. A Google search of his name yields over four and half million search results. Seventeen of his books have been translated into English, and several more have been published in German and Spanish, growing at a rate of two or three books annually. Despite being born in South Korea, his philosophical training is German, the adopted language in which he writes his philosophical work. One of his academic interests is media theory, where he first worked at Staaliche Hochschule für Gestaltung de Karlsruhe and the University of Arts in Berlin. Two of his latest works, *Non-Things* (2021) and *Infocracy* (2022), focus primarily on the existential impact of information overload generated in the digital age. This is a theme he had already touched upon in his work *Society and Transparency* (2013), in which he criticises the voluntary disclosure of all types of information by organisations and individuals as one of the alienating consequences of neoliberalism.

## 2. Methodology

This article employs the critical-conceptual method. It reconceptualises “themes from secondary qualitative analysis of existing sources and reviews of published qualitative texts” (Protheroe et al., 2008, p. 3). The authors review Byung-Chul Han’s philosophical work from a communicative perspective, specifically within the field of public relations and strategic communication. They analysed 22 philosophical books by the author, translated into Spanish from a communicative standpoint. This analysis positioned Han among the critics of the impact of commercial communication on the public sphere. The words and concepts used to narrow the search were parts of his works where his criticism pertains to the impact of organisational communication on society and the public sphere, as well as the following terms: storytelling or narrative, narration or narrativity, communication, audiences, information, public sphere, public opinion, commercial communication and advertising.

After analysing his work, eight books primarily provide a communicative perspective in Han’s oeuvre, which includes *The Transparency Society* (Han, 2013). *In the Swarm* (Han, 2014a), *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Forms of Power* (Han, 2014b), *The Expulsion of the Other: Perception and Communication in Today’s Society* (Han, 2017a), *Please, Close Your Eyes* (Han, 2017b), *The Burnout Society* (Han, 2017c), *Non-Things* (Han, 2021) and *Infocracy* (Han, 2022). This essay provides an overview of his work on strategic communication from a fundamentally critical standpoint while also adopting a constructive outlook from which organisations can benefit in the pursuit of sustainability and a new approach to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

## 3. Results

In his work, Han questions the social role of content creation by companies and organisations without explicitly mentioning terms such as public relations or corporate communication because it is not only companies and organisations that contribute

to the information overload in the public sphere. In particular, Han criticises, echoing the same critique that Habermas (1991) made decades earlier, the destruction of the public sphere in which a public community of citizens have become passive and private consumers,

information is disseminated without passing through the public space. It is produced in private spaces and sent to private spaces. Social media expands this communication without community. No political public can be formed from influencers or followers. Digital communities are a form of community reduced to a commodity. (2022, p. 25)

Han's critique focuses on the disappearance of the public concept, the excess of information, the hypertrophy of storytelling, the pernicious effects of the contagion generated by virality, and the production of a dataistic and surveillance society whereby decisions are not made by humans but by data. The philosopher implicitly proposes an ecology of content creation that is dumped into the public sphere, which does not stray far from concepts in vogue in other fields, such as ecology and sustainability.

### 3.1. *The Phantom Public*

According to Han, digitalisation and the excess of irrelevant information deny the existence of the public as a political subject and agent of change. The classic public, driven by the process of individualisation promoted by digital culture, has been transformed into a disaggregated and conformist mass of individuals who passively receive or comment on irrelevant information provided by manufactured opinion leaders, "Digital outrage *cannot be chanted*. It is incapable of action, or narration. Rather it is an affective state that does not develop any powerful force or action" (Han, 2014a, p. 12). Han calls this new fleeting *mass* of individuals a *digital swarm* that "dissolve as quickly as they have emerged... they do not develop political energy" (p. 16). This mass has a narcissistic and dispersed character: "The digital swarm is not a mass because it is not inherent to any soul, to any spirit. The soul is congregating and unifying. The digital swarm consists of isolated individuals" (p. 14). Han criticises the collective and political notion of the public as being transformed into a *target* of isolated individuals pursuing their personal interests in the world of consumption.

The digital swarm lacks a soul or a mass spirit. Individuals who come together in a digital swarm do not develop any sense of "we"... The digital swarm, as opposed to the mass, is not coherent per se. It does not manifest in one *voice*. That is why it is perceived as *noise* (p. 14).

The metaphor of the swarm of isolated individuals in cells is new, but the idea that the public as such does not exist in the deliberation on public affairs is not. In fact, Han's description is reminiscent of what Lippman articulated a century earlier in *The Phantom Public* (2007), where the public is defined as a "mere phantom" or "abstraction" (p. 67) due to its ineffectiveness in engaging with significant issues. In this work, and the earlier *Public Opinion* (1997), Lippmann, like Han, but in the context of the explosion of mass communication, denies the existence of the public as a political entity. Instead, he sees it as "a group of people who are interested in an issue and can influence it by supporting or opposing its main actors" (p. 67). The main difference between Lippmann, who had engaged in propaganda, and Han is that Lippmann admits that the public could be activated under certain circumstances. Han considers it unfeasible in a digital context that is heavily marked by individual interests.

### 3.2. *The hypertrophy of storytelling*

Han does not criticise, as in the past, the management of communication by companies to promote consumerism and materialism. For Han, the problem lies in the storytelling developed by communication experts and informers, which strips things of their essence. This is the *leitmotif* of his book *Non-things* (2021), in which he contradicts the traditional attitude of intellectuals towards marketing and communication. The philosopher blames communication (and likewise the information generated by the media) for leading us to a post-material world in which things have lost all their meaning in favour of a more or less artificial story to which they have been connected.

Products are infused with emotions through storytelling. For creating value, the production of distinctive information that promises consumers special experiences or the experience of something special is crucial. Information is always more important than the appearance of the commodity. The aesthetic-cultural content of a commodity is the true product. The economy of experience substitutes the economy of the thing (Han, 2021, p. 15).

The pernicious effects of information overload are a recurring theme throughout his work, not only by hindering the human ability to discern reality, “more information and communication alone do not clarify the world” (Han, 2014a, p. 73) but by reducing the individual’s connection to the material, “the flood of information to which we are exposed today undoubtedly diminishes, the ability to reduce things to its essence” (p. 52). The chaos generated by the constant flow of communication opposes the factuality of existence, “the noise of communication has suffocated silence. The proliferation and massification of things have displaced emptiness. Heaven and earth are full of things (Han, 2017c). Han (2021) contrasts the enduring, factual Heideggerian human world,

to the nascent digital order, in which the world ‘remains a system of information that can be requested.’ Things do not condition the digital order, while the earthly order affirms the human being conditioned by things. (p. 66).

It is what Heidegger (1994) calls “being-in-itself from producing” (para.12) that symbolises the thing, and that is lost with the abuse of storytelling that turns it into mere representation, into information capitalism that “unlike industrial capitalism, also commodifies the immaterial” (Han, 2021, p. 18). This is a capitalism of fiction in which objects disappear because they are unnecessary; only the production of reality is (Verdú, 2003). Han (2021) condemns the excess of emotion at the expense of the material,

For example, the information content of things, a brand’s image, is more important than their use value. We primarily perceive the information contained in things. When we buy things, we buy and consume emotions. Products are imbued with emotions through some form of storytelling (p. 15).

Han vindicates Heidegger’s Potter’s jug in his essay *The Thing* (1994) since “consumer products end up in the trash so quickly because we do not use them because we no longer possess them” (Han, 2021, p. 16). The blame lies in the lack of narrative communication that marketing professionals provide. Strategic communication disregards materiality, consumed by the plasma in which digital information is consumed; “the layer of information that covers things like a membrane without openings prevents the perception of *intensities*” (p. 53).

### 3.3. Information and Communication Overload

According to Han (2017b), not only do things disappear, but time as well. The excess of communication and information “has led us to a time incapable of silence or of concluding any process, a time that no longer exhales any scent. But thought is not possible without silence” (p. 127). The omnipresence of storytelling and the constant flow of communication between brands, media, and audiences do not generate a narrative, a meaningful time.

Neither the tweets nor the information is recounted to give rise to a *narration*. The timeline does not tell any life story or biography. It is an additive, not a narrative. The digital Man *digitises* because he is constantly counting and calculating. The digital absolutises numbers and counting... Even inclinations are counted in the form of ‘likes’ (Han, 2014, p. 33).

Han (2017a) criticises the obsession with capturing attention, which prevents us from being interested in or engaging with the distinct to facilitate communicative flow. Han (2017a) wonders what Heidegger would say today in the face of “the noise of communication, the *digital storm* of data and information” (p. 6), which “testify the *lack of truth*, and even *the lack of being*” (2017b, p. 23). The attention economy betrays the distinct and monopolises the self, “this hypervisibility, this hypercommunication, this hyperproduction, this hyperconsumption, that lead to a rapid stagnation of the *sameness* are obscene” (Han, 2017a, p. 7). Strategies for capturing audiences’ attention succeed because “communication reaches its maximum speed where the same responds to the same, when a *chain reaction sameness* takes place” (Han, 2017b, pp. 12-13), as what is sought is always to resort to the familiar, to the *sameness*, to overcome barriers to entry in a noisy world. Things lose their uniqueness by expressing themselves “completely in the dimension of price” (Han, 2017b, p. 12).

Another aspect Han criticises is the positivism of communication, as “the positive society avoids any form of playing with negativity, as this halts communication” (p. 23). Negativity is perceived as unpleasant and anti-consumption, and, ultimately, it does not allow for the building of mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and the public. “The mass of communication also raises its economic value. Negative verdicts undermine communication. ‘Likes’ are followed more quickly by connective communication than ‘dislikes’” (p. 23).

Noisy commercial communication, with its emphasis on the self, has led individuals to become products themselves: “Each individual produces themselves. Silence produces nothing. That is why capitalism does not love silence. Information capitalism produces the compulsion to communicate” (Han, 2021, p. 71). The self disintegrates on the Internet, where “one advertises mainly about oneself” (2017a, p. 55). Commercial communication has become a constant process of self-production.

### 3.4 Symmetrical communication

On the positive side, Han absolves the new digital communicative paradigm by favouring equality between sender and receiver, as receivers, as previously mentioned, also produce themselves and generate content. In this sense, he confirms the activist conception of Critical Theory in Public Relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; L’Etang et al., 2016),

The digital fabric favours symmetrical communication. Today, participants in communication do not simply consume information passively. Instead, they actively generate it themselves. No unequivocal hierarchy separates the sender from the receiver (Han, 2014, p. 8).

Han (2014b) admits that institutionalised communication senders continue to seek hegemony and control; therefore, although shitstorms are possible and frequent, the asymmetry of power causes silence, an ability in the receiver to “control the shitstorms of the network” (p. 10), in the receiver, breaking that asymmetry.

### 3.5. *The destruction of the public sphere*

Like Habermas (1991), Han (2021) believes that “today freedom of action is reduced to freedom of choice and consumption” (p. 12). The public sphere has been corrupted because the public space is no longer necessary “since the digital medium, as such, privatises communication by shifting the production of information from the public to the private sphere” (Han, 2017a, p. 6). The public sphere, far from being that space of deliberation in eighteenth-century cafés described by Habermas, has been configured as a place of passion, of mass turmoil fueled by a feeling of protest, “the shitstorms or ‘digital lynchings’ constitute an uncontrolled avalanche of passions that do not shape any public sphere” (p. 55). Digital communication keeps us in the private sphere because “to obtain information or products, I do not have to move into the public sphere” (p. 55). The digital world only allows the sender, whether a person or a brand, to self-promote and shuns the debate on public issues,

There is no mention of problems we could address and discuss collectively on Facebook. What is shared is mainly information that does not require discussion and only allows the sender to promote themselves. In the “like” community, one only finds oneself and those like oneself. (p. 55).

In contrast, “the political space is a space where I meet others, talk to others, and listen to others” (p. 55). Going viral, the dream of any public relations or digital marketing campaign poses a threat to democracy by spreading trivial content that distracts the public’s attention:

In the era of digital media, the discursive public sphere is not threatened by mass media entertainment formats or infotainment but by the viral spread and multiplication of information, that is, by the infodemic (Han, 2022, p. 17).

Han (2022) discusses the privatisation of the public sphere, “the public sphere disintegrates into private spaces. As a result, our attention is not focused on issues relevant to society as a whole” (p. 17). The smartphone, enthroned in advertising and public relations textbooks as the key to invading citizens’ private sphere at all times and places with organisational and product messages, appears as an apparatus of subjugation, producing consumption and communication zombies instead of empowered citizens” (p. 24).

It is worth highlighting the similarity between some of Han’s texts regarding the lack of rationality and the contagious nature of digital communication and the theorists of mass psychology from the late 19th century, such as Gustave Le Bon. Han (2014a) considers that digital communication “not only takes the form of a spectrum but also of a virus. It is infectious because it occurs immediately on an emotional or affective level. *Contagion* is a post-hermeneutic communication, which does not properly offer anything to read or think about” (p. 48). He attributes the same emotional and viral character discussed by communication professionals in any manual.

At the height of mass media societies, Le Bon spoke of how “contagion (mainly through the mass press and the masses) is powerful enough to impose not only certain opinions on people but also certain ways of feeling (...) Opinions and beliefs spread through the mechanism of contagion, and very little, however, through reasoning” (Le Bon, 1986, p. 96). According to

Han, the digital swarm remains a mass individualised by consuming information through devices. A perspective that is not new, as Gabriel Tarde formulated it at the beginning of the 20th century, stating that imitation and contagion did not require physical contact or proximity since the men of his time “no longer rub shoulders, nor see each other, or understand each other... What is the bond that unites them? (Tarde, 1904, p. 3). That bond is called the “printed press” (Nocera, 2008, p. 7). Han (2014a) describes how information or content, even with little significance, “spreads rapidly through the network like an epidemic or pandemic. Any weight of meaning does not burden it. No other medium is capable of this virus-like contagion” (p. 48). Both discourses share the identification of new communication channels with a greater speed and a loss of meaning in the content being transmitted and its ability to create trends. Han (2022) considers that the concept of virality is incompatible with truth “because the images do not argue or justify anything... Arguments and reasoning have no place in tweets or memes that spread and proliferate at viral speed” (p. 23).

Han (2014b) also describes the effect that gamification of communication used by brands has on human communication as a whole, “with the logic of gratification from *likes*, *friends* or *followers*, social communication is now subjected to game mode. The ludification of communication runs parallel to its commercialisation. It destroys human communication” (p. 46). Han aligns with other authors who question the moral validity of what has come to be called the attention economy (Franck, 2019; 2020), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2020) or surveillance advertising (Klein, 2022).

### 3.6. *Surveillance Society*

Han also devotes part of his work on communication to reflecting on the transition that the digital world has brought about, which he calls biopower, in the manner of Foucault (2012), whereby humans self-discipline their bodies through access to the means of production, to psychopolitics. According to Han (2022), corporations will continue to exercise their power over citizens, but in a different way than in the past, “the decisive factor in obtaining power today is not the possession of the means of production, but access to information, which is used for the surveillance and behavioural control and forecasting” (p. 2).

Han (2014b) understands the network as a digital panoptic whose inhabitants, unlike the disciplinary society that subjugates the body mainly in the work setting, “create a network and communicate intensely with each other. What makes total control possible is not spatial and communicative isolation, but networking and hypercommunication” (p. 60). Han calls this new modality *psychopower*, which “with the help of digital surveillance, can read thoughts and control them” (p. 64). As Zuboff (2020) states, capitalism, under the guise of optimising the efficiency of strategic communication, counts likes, the number of followers, the time spent on a website or the quantity and quality of the audiences’ comments, is a surveillance capitalism that “degrades people to the status of *data and consumer livestock*” (Han, 2022, p. 2). This surveillance will be more effective: “The more data we generate, the more intensely we communicate” (p. 5). Companies have managed to infiltrate this domain into everyday life “behind the pleasantness of social media, the convenience of search engines, the lulling voices of voice assistants or the efficiency of *smarter apps*” (p. 7). The knowledge of our audiences, through the *feedback* they provide by accessing social networks and the Internet, replaces the traditional droning repetition of messages in traditional media, “The decisive factor in gaining power is now the possession of information. It is not mass media propaganda, but information, that ensures dominance” (p. 11). Paraphrasing Neil Postman (2005), whom he frequently cites, stakeholders are producing and consuming information “to death” (Han, 2022, p. 16). Unlike the biopower of the disciplinary society. “the information regime, by contrast,

has access to *psychographic* information, which it uses for *psychopolitics*" (p. 17). In sum, Han holds commercial organisations responsible for establishing surveillance capitalism to promote the construction of relationships between organisations and the public to monetise those relationships.

#### 4. Discussion

In this article, through an analysis of Han's philosophical work, greater attention is advocated for the role that public relations and strategic corporate communication play in the public sphere. Business organisations are incentivised to place and send as many messages as possible in the public sphere since "the amount of information can never be considered too much as long as it is true and strengthens the organisation's reputation (García, 2022, p. 332). Its marginal cost is close to nothing, thanks to the benefits of technology. However, this does not apply to losing collective attention towards essential issues (Farrer, 2022; Klein, 2022). In the past, the gatekeepers and liberal media values used to control access to the public sphere of debate. This no longer occurs, or at least it only happens in a tiny proportion of all circulating messages. Including corporate media messages. These filters seem inadequate in the world of social media and emerging communication technologies (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Illing & Gershberg, 2022), algorithms (Bucher, 2018), digital advertising (Hwang, 2022; Klikauer, 2021) and the weakness of news companies that make journalists look to PR firms for news (Waters et al., 2010; Erzikova et al., 2018). Social media is an extractive technology for business organisations, and it is often argued that it was created for this purpose ((Hwang, 2022; Klikauer, 2021; Zuboff, 2020). It is within this context of perceived insincerity and utilisation of the public that Postmodern Theory (Holtzhausen, 2002; 2012) first emerged in the academic field of public relations, followed by the Critical Theory in Public Relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; L'Etang et al., 2016).

Therefore, it is time to analyse and bring Han's work into the history of communication. In the era of sustainability and ecology, one of his merits, whose style can sometimes be excessively poetic, is to suggest that too much information causes pollution in the public sphere and detracts us from reality by including products from a purely material perspective. In this sense, Han's use of the term storytelling, understood as the verbiage surrounding things (including products) preventing us from appreciating them correctly, is not arbitrary and expands the ethical scope of strategic communication. Han is proposing an ecology of communication and information not because less is more, as is sometimes suggested. Still, because less does not distract our attention, it does not demobilise us as citizens and allows us to focus on what is real. In ethics classes and textbooks, what is usually taught to future professionals is that information should be truthful but not necessarily scarce or measured.

Any information or communication capable of generating audience loyalty is considered positive if it is *true*. A competent professional must be a good storyteller. The ability to organise an event or pseudo-event to attract attention through quality storytelling is considered a professional success that deserves to be shared through a case study. However, the amount of information deemed optimal for dissemination in the public sphere is not considered one of the features of corporate CSR. Some companies claim to be responsible by managing data (although Han also criticises this and calls it a digital panopticon) or by promoting responsible consumption of their products. Still, they have never considered limiting the amount of information they disseminate to their audiences in the public sphere.

## 5. Conclusion

Although philosophy in recent decades has paid attention to new phenomena arising from mass communication, mainly digital communication and the emergence of social networks, it has not placed them at the centre of the debate as Han does. The Korean-German philosopher believes that smartphones are at the heart of this and aligns himself with theorists, primarily from the field of political communication (Farrer, 2022; Illing & Gerhsberg, 2022), who place the lack of attention stemming from the attention economy at the centre of the debate. This has repeatedly occurred when new forms of mass communication emerged in the landscape. It first happened with the emergence of the mass press in the early 20th century, when Lippmann wrote about modern man's inability to analyse reality for himself. Subsequently, Habermas addressed this issue following the rise of new media, such as commercial television and its contamination of the public sphere.

There are several similarities. All of them discuss the impact of technology on communication. Likewise, they diagnose that citizens have become mere consumers due to the distraction exerted by these new media and the inability to process information. In any case, for scholars in the field of communication, it is good news that a philosopher such as Han, controversial as his figure may be, is addressing this discipline and giving it a prominence that it seemed to have lost in favour of technology. We may be talking about a particular circular thinking in the history of communication that occurs when new technologies emerge. All of them question the status quo of the public sphere, which is vilified by new forms of content that call into question an individual manipulated by desires and emotions.

Within this analysis framework, a key idea in Han's work is the importance he attaches to the factor of attention. In an attention economy where the ability to pay attention has become a major cultural issue (Crawford, 2015; Franck, 2020), Han (2021) considers that the lack of attention weakens human relationships. For this reason his work is essential in this context. Ideally, after reading Han, organisations and communication professionals should reflect on the need to disseminate a post, a photo or a press release, even if it is theoretically targeted at the desired audiences. Public relations researchers, such as those in Critical Public Relations Theory, can apply specific measures to encourage corporate activism on the attention issue. Furthermore, students, professors, and researchers in the field should think more often about whether communication strategies can unintentionally affect society beyond their persuasive effectiveness.

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## 7. Conflict of interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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