

## The Future Of Communications

An Interview with Robert L. Dilenschneider, Founder, The Dilenschneider Group, Inc.

**EDITORS' NOTE** Robert Dilenschneider is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of The Dilenschneider Group, a strategic counseling and public relations consulting firm. He is considered one of the world's foremost communications experts and is frequently called upon by the media for commentary on major news stories. He is the author of several books, including *The Ultimate Guide to Power and Influence and 50 Plus! – Critical Career Decisions for the Rest of Your Life.*



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**FIRM BRIEF** *The Dilenschneider Group (dilenschneider.com) provides access to CEOs and their communications professionals in fields ranging from mergers and acquisitions to marketing, government affairs and international media. The Firm's objectives are to bring clients a level of communications counsel, creativity and exposure to networks and contacts not available elsewhere.*

### What do you see the future bringing in the world of communications?

Let me begin my answer with a line attributed to Yogi Berra that is one of the great insights of all time: "It's hard to make predictions, especially about the future."

Nevertheless, as with all forecasts, we have to start with what we know right now, and two developments come immediately to mind: The rise of artificial intelligence and the decline of American news-gathering organizations, especially local newspapers. The first opens up a vast array of possibilities. So, too, does the second, but in a deeply concerning way. According to a recent report, an average of five local papers are closing every two weeks, leaving more than half of all American counties as what are called "news deserts."

It's not just local news that's suffering, either. Major papers, driven by declines in advertising, circulation and profits have made extensive cutbacks in their reporting and editing staffs, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *New York Daily News*. And it's not just the newspaper business that's suffering. According to a recent report, "Of 1,100 public radio stations and affiliates, only about one in five is producing local journalism."

### What role do you see artificial intelligence playing in the news business?

There are those who think AI with its incredible ability to consume, analyze and formalize information is the solution to the shrinking of traditional media. In theory, yes. In the real world, no. AI may be able to process data-based news such as the weather or stock market results, but it cannot gather news. It can't grab a pad and pen and head out to press conferences, trials, crime scenes, fires, natural disasters, war zones and all the many other places where so much news is made. That takes reporters who, in the late Jimmy Breslin's memorable phrase, "climb the stairs."

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I don't doubt that attempts will be made to apply artificial intelligence to the news business, and some of it will be valid and successful. But one of the dangers I see is a future in which many organizations will present us with AI-produced packages that have all the earmarks of news, but are, well . . . artificial – rewrites of corporate press releases, summaries of politicians' speeches, official pronouncements – with no real reporting, no in-person interviews, no eyewitness accounts, no digging, investigating, exposing malfeasance.

We get a good idea of how wrong that can go when we look at the way news is handled in present-day China. The rulers in Beijing don't want anything reported that might reflect poorly on the regime. Period. Even before the advent of AI, an army of bureaucrats used cutting-edge technology to

identify and suppress anything that was unwelcome. One consequence was the coverup of what was going on in the city of Hunan in late 2019 and early 2020. When a doctor there warned that a lethal virus was spreading, he was charged with "disrupting public order" and silenced. A news blackout quickly followed. We now know, of course, that the virus was COVID-19 and that Beijing's determination to cover up the facts led to a worldwide lockdown with disastrous economic and social effects and more than 1 million deaths in the U.S. alone.

If we do indeed wind up in a world where "news" is produced by AI programs – and if those programs are designed to put a smiley face on everything – we're in obvious danger.

### Do you feel that artificial intelligence is a dangerous development?

I certainly don't mean to suggest AI will be nothing but trouble. Consider this positive assessment from OnPassive, a technology company that develops AI for marketing purposes: "AI has made communication more accessible in several ways, from virtual assistants and Chatbots to language translation and personalized communications. By breaking down language barriers, improving accessibility, and automating routine tasks, AI is helping to create a more connected and efficient world."

The challenge, as is true with every important innovation in human history, is to maximize the positive contributions while defending as best we can against the abuses.

### In the midst of all these unpredictable developments, are there any certainties about the future of communications?

Some things are certain. More people and organizations will be involved in communications. The stakes will be higher than ever before. There will be a tremendous amount of disinformation, so we will all need to find ways to get to the truth. And totally new means and methods for getting messages out will shape the future.

The challenge, of course, will be for both the professionals and their clients to keep up with a constantly changing marketplace as well as evolving technology. The content of the messages – which frequently just boils down to "take a look at what we have to offer" – will stay much the same. But as we are already seeing, the audience can be global in nature, which means not only dealing with a variety of languages, but also many different cultures, different values, different needs. Developing a winning message will be as crucial as ever, but more than ever in a complex future, so will be understanding public attitudes. ●