
6 WRITTEN COMMUNICATION - PLANNING AND PRODUCTION

C A Nascimento

Abraham Lincoln has been quoted almost ad nauseum in so many different circumstances in order to illustrate such a vast variety of points of view that I hesitate to quote him once again, nevertheless, one observation the late American President made in regard to the value of effective public communication is so much to the point that I consider it worth repeating here: -

"With public sentiment, nothing can fail.
Without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently,
he who moulds public opinion goes deeper than he
who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He
makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible
to be executed."

If we translate Lincoln's observation in terms of the scientist, rather than the politician, we might paraphrase to read:

"He who moulds public opinion goes deeper than
he who hypothesizes or pronounces scientific
law. He makes hypotheses and scientific
law possible or impossible to be executed."

Today we have been asked to look at one communication channel: literal communication in its written, or if you like, in its printed form as opposed to person to person, or the channels of sound or sight and sound, though all three of those channels are dependent at some stage or other on the preparation of the written script.

There are others on the panel today eminently more qualified than I am to deal with the actual techniques of writing for public communication. I thought, therefore, that I would deal with what some communicators describe as those variables in communication which create "barriers to effective communication," and which I think we might more usefully refer to as aids to effective communication.

Again, as with the medium of the press conference, with the written communication, which is aimed at persuading public understanding and acceptance of the message we seek to communicate, we are concerned with the problem of exposure before we can achieve awareness, interest, evaluation, trial and adoption.

Newspapers, pamphlets, posters, booklets and books need not be read. Radio and television sets need not be turned on and

are easily switched off. Exposure is not guaranteed through these media.

And even when exposure is achieved, as communicators, we are still faced with the problems of predisposed attitudes which derive from the structural set which individuals hold.

The message you wish to convey may be simple enough, clear enough, nevertheless, when that message is received, it may not result in the behaviour you intended or expected.

Some sociologists describe these communication variables, such as the individuals' structural set, the actual channel chosen for communication, the credibility factor of the communicator, the influence of opinion leaders and small groups, the symbol system we use, as "extra communication factors and conditions."

It is important, therefore, that in the preparation of written communications we are all aware and understand the pitfalls along the way to reaching the audience we aim at.

If there is a tendency to be secure in the knowledge that what is sought for the community to accept is best for the community, as may well be the case with the scientist, there is even greater need to be conscious of the conditions for communication.

What we are talking about is the need to get into the minds, the habits, the mores, of the audience we seek to reach; the need to identify and understand the sources of influence to which our audience are subject before we ever put pen to paper.

The problem of course, with effective communication, is that it is almost a science in itself, and it intimately relates to a number of other scientific disciplines. We are concerned with human values, attitudes and opinions; we are concerned with human behaviour, human environment, the meaning of language, sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics and semantics are all involved.

Earlier, I mentioned the symbol system we use or the language we use. It is this language that contains the message in an act of communication, yet the language we use is a very imprecise tool and we need to guard against this fact.

One communication specialist has observed that "language is a product of life rather than the result of an exact science, it is a means people utilise to convey their needs, to express their emotions, to control their environment. Language often fails as a means to accurate communication because it very frequently fails to relate to reality."

Individuals who use the same language but who do not have a common experience or environment, for instance can often understand different things from the same phrases and even words.

This is why a universal language would not necessarily improve understanding or communication between different people, that is why our efforts to communicate through the written word and indeed the spoken word so often go astray.

Imagine, for instance, as those of us in Georgetown can, seeking directions in the middle of Rupununi Savannahs from an Amerindian. He may say to you that the place where you want to go is "just around the corner". If you are from Georgetown, you may set off walking, assuming that it is but a block away only to discover, five miles later and at the expense of weary feet and an exhausted temper, that you have not yet arrived, and that when an Amerindian talks about "just around the corner" his experience is very different from those of the city person.

Let us remember that the languages that we human beings use to convey meaning to one another, are simply a symbolic presentation of our experience.

To identify the weaknesses and strengths of our audience, we must know the sources of influences, whether they be political, religious, educational, etc., within the community; we must learn about the pervading likes and dislikes, the the superstitions which are held.

Then there is the phenomenon of opinion leaders. Those persons in almost every community who exert a special influence on other members in the community on almost every subject and who frequently are turned to for an explanation of an involved subject or a new idea communicated through the print media, or, for that matter, any other channel of mass communications.

To complete the communications process or at least make it more effective, it is useful to know who the opinion leaders are and sometimes structure our appeals directly to them.

Sociologists, Berelson and Steiner, have done considerable work on the influence the "small group" can bring to bear on communications directed at persuading behavioural change: "small group is where a great deal of human behaviour, including the 'right way' to behave is learned and enforced."

Berelson and Steiner define the small group as being not more than 25 persons, who frequently associate together in face to face relations over an extended period of time, who distinguish themselves in some way from other persons around them, who are mutually aware of their membership in the group and who are conscious that their present relationship within the group is an end in itself.

Berelson and Steiner take the position, on the basis of extensive research, that the individual attached to a small group, be it his family, a membership group such as a trade union, a political party, a club, a cultural group or a church group, places one of the major limitations on the mass media as a means of persuading people.

In fact, a number of communication sociologists have argued that anti-social attitudes are invariably entrenched in small groups rather than being held by individuals themselves and that these attitudes can only be effectively dealt with through the group and by penetration of the group rather than by external direction to the group.

Of course individuals belong to more than one group, but when there are conflicting pressures between groups, it has been reasonably established that the individual always tends to resolve the conflict in the direction of the group to which he is more strongly tied.

There is a great deal more that can be said and discussed on the intriguing communication factor of small group influences and the behaviour they generate, but once as an educator or a scientist seeking to communicate with a large community, you are aware of these group influences, you can make an active effort to prepare what you write accordingly and use your knowledge as an aid to effective communication.

I hope you will forgive me for having dealt in generalities rather than particulars, but I have done this only because I tend to be overly conscious, perhaps, that there is no more complicated an organism on earth than the human being and that the act of one human being communicating with another is a thoroughly complicated process and for that reason often the least understood, though we do it every day and take it so much for granted.