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Abstract

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Who Controls Your Message?

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As we move further into the electronics age, several agents of control are muscling their way into the business of communicating. Specifically, technology, fashion, and a one-way mind-set are fighting for control over message development and delivery. This article advises land-grant university communicators on how they can recognize—and beat—these control agents, and how communicators can help land-grant universities overcome reputation deficit.

We, as communicators, are in danger of losing control of our message. I am not talking about a shadowy conspiracy to subvert our civil liberties. I do not have any evidence of such a thing occurring.

The control I am talking about concerns, first, the role of technology. Second, it concerns the way popular fashion shapes and often misshapes our messages. And, finally, it concerns our own intellectual honesty. I call it the problem of the One-Way Mind. Therefore, let me sketch how these agents of control are muscling into our business of being professional communicators.

Introduction

The first potential agent of control is Technology. And the question we have to ask ourselves is simply this: Is the computer working for me, or am I working for the computer? In other words, who or what is really in charge of my communications program?

To get an answer to this question, we have to be honest with ourselves. For example, I am sure every professional communicator has mastered the computer or word processor or is, at the very least, reasonably literate in WordPerfect, WordStar, Xywrite or some other equally available software.

One of the things I have found over the past several years, however, is that the hardware and the software have together

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made composition so easy—that is, the simple process of putting down one word after another after another—that nobody sends or receives a single page of anything anymore.

Every interoffice memorandum, however inconsequential, is now two to three pages long, single-spaced. Why not? It is so easy to elaborate and illustrate and delineate and pontificate, that you might as well go ahead and do so—just in case. After all, some addressee might miss your point or lose your meaning. Let us not risk having that happen!

Of course, that is the danger, is it not? We are all fond of repeating the old saying that "less is more." Unfortunately, as soon as we repeat it, we forget it. Instead, we revert to producing more for more's sake.

But "more is less." As communicators, we know this.

Many of us are now so addicted to technology, however, that we are genuinely hooked on its capacity to deliver, effortlessly and immediately, a pot-full of information, when a cup-full would do just as well, if not much better.

What is the danger in all this? The danger is that the ideas we want to convey—the thinking, the reasoning, the creativity—the message we want to convey is hopelessly layered, buried under reams of "output."

We are not statisticians, CPAs, economists or demographers. And in saying this, I do not mean to belittle these fine professionals. We all understand their need to generate tables and charts in order to tease out some new relationships among seemingly unrelated data. So it makes sense for their technologies to spew out incredible volumes of data because, presumably, someone is going to make something out of it.

But the communicators reading this, and others of our colleagues who are equally concerned with ideas and trends as well as hard data, know that "less is more." We are conscious of the fact that our message can be buried by excess.

Excess is not a new problem for communicators. The late Andy Warhol summed it up quite well a few years back when an art critic was looking over a display of Warhol's paintings at a big opening show. He saw not one Coca-Cola bottle, but rows and rows of them...not one can of Campbell's soup, but nine of them...not one portrait of Marilyn Monroe, but 16 of them. So the art critic asked Andy Warhol why he chose to be that kind of painter. Andy Warhol said, "Because I am a deeply superficial person."

I think Andy Warhol was on to something.

But it is not just the computer or the word processor that we need to worry about. The FAX machine is another technological agent of control that

ought to set off alarm bells. Here again we have the ability to reproduce pages and pages of excessive copy and then transmit all of them to several, or several dozen, unsuspecting recipients within minutes.

What happens at their end? Have we sent them a message they can identify and understand, or have we just sent them a lot of stuff—quickly?

I am reminded of the story a young friend told me of his own experience in the brave new world of electronic journalism. When he started work on a major metropolitan daily, he was introduced to his brand-new IBM computer. Happily for him, he was already familiar with that model and knew how to take advantage of its speed of composition and transmission.

He finished his first afternoon on the job by filing three stories with his editor. He was whistling when he left the newsroom for a late cup of coffee at the snack bar. When he returned, however, he found a folder on his desk with his stories inside and a little note from his editor scrawled on the cover. The note said, "I do not require stupidity at the speed of light. Your normal pace is acceptable." My friend became a more thoughtful and more professional reporter from that moment on.

But most people do not have the benefit of a tough editor to remind them that substance is the key to any message, not the

speed of its transmission. For example, according to Lanier Worldwide, Incorporated, about 7 million private companies now use FAX machines. Lanier says these companies perform an average of 25 transmissions a day, with an average of 3 pages per transmission. That is 75 pages a day for the average company using a FAX, or 525 million pages of information generated each day in this country by companies on FAX alone.

Granted, many of these transmissions are mail-order requests or take-out lunch orders or bids for small jobs or similar brief material needing fast turnaround. All too often, though, a writer will use the FAX machine to send "at the speed of light" a large volume of material that should never have seen the light of day in the first place.

President Abraham Lincoln had a favorite way of describing just such a writer. Lincoln would say, "He can compress the most words into the smallest idea of any man I ever met." Abe Lincoln had more than his share of trouble when he was President. I am glad for his sake that Washington, DC did not have FAX technology then as well. If it did, he might have said, "That fellow can squeeze more pages into the smallest idea of any person I ever met."

Some critics still talk of these technological advances—comput-

ers and FAX machines and video recorders and so on—as nothing more than "toys for grown-ups." I do not. I take them seriously.

I believe these new technologies can enable us to communicate a lucid message quickly between two or more points. Basically, that is a "plus." But I must emphasize the word "lucid." That is the message part.

Fashion

A second agent of control trying to take over our message is "fashion." In using this word, I do not mean the beautiful gowns from Paris or the colorful cosmetics from New York. I mean fashion in message development and message delivery.

For example, it was very fashionable during the 1992 election year to deliver an anti-Washington message, even an "I hate Washington" message. Everybody was doing it, including some of the people who have worked in Washington for many years!

As a result, the public spent a lot of time and energy trying to find the real message that was coming from this or that candidate for public office. And I believe a great many citizens gave up trying.

We got bored. Or we got tired. Or we discovered that there was not really a message there after all. As Gertrude Stein said about the moon many years ago, "There is no there there."

Satellite communications and high-tech "town meetings" were interesting uses of new technology in this election. But when these new technologies were used for bashing sessions, the candidates could just as well have gone back to billboards and bumper stickers. They would have saved on all that electrical power for one thing.

The second agent, then, that will fight for control over your message content and delivery is fashion. How many people kept up with the new fashions in delivery by switching from U.S. Postal Service to United Parcel Service, then switching from UPS to Federal Express, and then switching from Federal Express to FAX? And how many of them truly needed the speed?

You may call it "being trendy," "faddish" or "on the cutting edge." I call it simply "fashion." Do not be captured by it, because it can take over.

One-Way Mind

A third agent of control is the one-way mind. I am not only talking about other people's minds. I am speaking about our own minds as well. Here again technology can help, or it can be part of the problem.

We tend to focus on the many super-fast ways available to us for sending messages to other people. But unfortunately we tend not to focus on what happens at the other end. What, for

example, do those customers or clients or taxpayers or vendors actually do with our message?

I do not believe we really know. And most of the time, I suspect, we simply do not care either.

Nor do we spend a lot of time thinking about our own role as receivers of messages. What do we do with the electronic and paper messages that come our way?

I think I know. If the messages come in on disk or through a modem, we warehouse them in vaguely worded directories in mysterious drives. There is the "CRANK" directory on the A: drive, for example, or the "HOLD-IT" directory on the B: drive. Then we never have to look at them again, but we are secure in the fact that we are nevertheless keeping them forever.

If we receive a pile of hard-copy messages, spewed out of the FAX machine, we put them in an in-box or file folder or stationery tray, on a shelf or side-stand, or on the floor. Again, we feel good about the fact that we do not just throw them away.

But we do throw them away, do we not? We close our minds to the message the minute it comes in. We do not process the information. We simply store it. That, I am afraid, is exactly what happens when we send our own messages to other people, too.

Maybe you have noticed that we have not yet become a "paperless" society, a circumstance that was predicted almost 20 years ago. Quite the contrary. We are swimming in paper—drowning in paper—despite our new electronic technologies.

One reason for this phenomenon is simply that none of us has ever really focused on how to respond to messages we receive. We just know how to send them.

Frankly, that is why I have come to like the so-called "junk mail" that comes to my office every day. I understand junk mail, and I think I know what to do with it. I scan it, make a quick decision, and then throw it away. With the messages carried by junk mail I am honest and efficient. And I function without guilt.

But with every other kind of message I kid myself into thinking it may be worth saving. Then I save it by inefficiently burying it somewhere.

When we handle messages that way, we have clearly lost control over the whole system of communications. It is no longer the proverbial two-way street. Instead, we have put messages on a one-way track to oblivion.

If that is the situation in your case, I strongly advise you take a fresh, hard look at the way you communicate and how you communicate. And if you are governed by a one-way mind-set,

now is the time to confront it and change it.

Finally, I believe my ideas on the "agents of control" that want to take over our messages and our communications profession may also apply to many of our colleagues in business, in industry and in government.

I will close by directing this observation to land-grant university communicators. These have been difficult times for the land-grant university system. The competition to stay afloat has been exceptionally fierce.

Facing the Reputation Deficit

John Paluszek, public relations consultant to ESCOP and ECOP, believes land-grant universities are facing a reputation deficit. He says we are experiencing a life-and-death competition for the hearts and minds of Americans, and ultimately their political and financial support.

"The Land-Grant System," he says, "must reposition and redefine itself, its mission, and its delivery on that mission in an America that is reinventing itself. That means 'do not tell me about what you did for me yesterday, tell me how you will help me today and tomorrow'" (p. 4).

Paluszek is not ready to call our reputation problem a crisis. But he cites ample evidence that we are swimming against some strong currents:

1) Federal funds are being redirected.
2) State and local budgets are under unprecedented pressure; at least 15 states reportedly cut their support for Cooperative Extension last year.
3) Alleged "bureaucracy" is under attack as never before.
4) Higher education is on the defensive because of, among other things, ever-rising costs.
5) Agriculture, once respected, romanticized and even held "holy" is now taken for granted.

Paluszek believes the Land Grant System sometimes seems like a house divided. It has what some call "conflicting patrons"; commodity groups ask for traditional research and information but legislators demand accountability to new and diverse agendas.

Environmentalists call for "sustainable agriculture," he says, but urban sociologists seek help on social pathologies that no one can fully fathom.

Our Extension and research leaders, at both state and national levels, have heeded Paluszek's warning. They have concluded that there is an urgent need to address the image problem.

They point out, however, that one of the challenging complexities in dealing with the image problem is the growing number and diversity of audiences we serve and from which we seek political and financial support. These include internal audiences, professional societies, obvious beneficiaries of our products, interest groups, the general public, media, and political leaders. With such varied audiences, we are tempted, I know, to exploit the full range of technology to get the word out: computer bulletin boards, preprogrammed diskettes, tv ads, multiple simultaneous FAX transmissions, interactive videos, 800 numbers, and 900 numbers. Before we plunge ahead, we need to concentrate on the message itself.

If we have lost our reputation with the public, it is not because we were unable to communicate at all. We have lost our reputation because the message we did communicate was not helpful, did not reach the appropriate audience, or in some way missed the mark and did not satisfy the public's need for information.

I can sum it up this way. Land-grant universities have been sending messages, but apparently have not listened to the messages coming back, messages from our numerous audiences.

It has not been a good time for the Land-Grant University System. Our proud system has been hurt by this inability to take control of its message, its inability to tailor its messages to its audiences, and its inability to reach new audiences. Now we have to work even harder to gain the respect of an ambivalent and skeptical public.

That is our challenge. We can get back on track if we, as communications professionals, again focus on the content of our messages. We must make sure every message is useful and deliver it to the most appropriate audiences in the most efficient way, regardless of the latest bells and whistles in technology or the newest fashion in rhetoric. Then be prepared with open minds to receive and learn from the messages coming back.

References

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