

The Unenviable Task

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The Unenviable Task

Abstract

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The Unenviable Task

Larry A. Quinn

The unenviable task for me is trying to summarize what has happened here the past day and a half . . . in just a few words. Perhaps at home, your unenviable task is taking out the garbage or scrubbing up all those pots and pans after a gourmet meal. But, let's think seriously for a moment about any unenviable task. What makes it unenviable? Is it difficult? Unpleasant? Just what makes it unenviable . . . a job that others are not fighting us to do?

There's something really challenging about an unenviable task. It's a job that is generally essential, and one that often requires courage and discipline to do.

By now, you must have guessed . . . the unenviable task I want to talk to you about today is that of being a government communicator.

There seems to be less envy these days for those who choose to toil in the halls of government. For those who produce government "flicks" or are referred to as government "flacks", there doesn't seem to be much love. But, just because few choose to compete with us . . . for our unenviable task . . . is that any reason for us not to take pride in the work we do? Does it make our work any less honorable? Decrease its importance? Spoil its effectiveness? No. . . to the contrary. If we choose to accept and achieve our unenviable task, we will rise above the unjust criticism . . . while, at the same time, we remember that our work is not above scrutiny.

As government communicators, we have an unenviable taskmaster . . . the American public. While we work in

Quinn is Chief, VideoFilm Center, USDA. This article comes from his remarks at the D.C. Region's 4th public affairs workshop May 22, 1981, after discussions and concern over the future of information.

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various times. We must never lose sight of our accountability to the public. How many times a day do you give yourself the "would I" test? I mean, How many times have you said to yourself, "would I" as a taxpayer be satisfied with the quantity, quality and content of what government communicators produce? "Would I" watch, listen to, or read the messages that I prepare as a government communicator? Perhaps our task wouldn't be as unenviable if we could answer "yes" to all those "would I's"!

As I reflected on our unenviable task last night, during my two-mile jog up and down the hills of my neighborhood, I seemed to remember one of those things that makes me feel really great! No, not the jogging even though I enjoyed that too, but something even more energizing—a communication success.

Though our task is UNenviable, it's not UNbearable. We don't do it UNenthusiastically or UNerringly . . . not even UNemotionally. Hopefully, our task is never UNedited, but it's seldom UNencumbered and is seemingly UNending. It's not UNeventful or UNfamiliar—even though it seems UNgodly. Yet, we approach this task with a fervor that is UNEqualed to avoid being UNemployed.

How can we communicators get out from UNDER and achieve UNDERstanding of our UNenviable task? One way is to respond to the changing needs of our society. Alvin Toffler, author of *Future Shock* and an exciting book called *The Third Wave*, says . . .

"Today a new wave of changes in technology and communication, in energy and values, is transforming our habits, expectations and lifestyles. While many people have been disturbed by all of these changes, others have been stimulated to new frontiers now being created in business and society . . ."

" . . . I believe individuals can prepare for such changes. First, go through life expecting change. It shouldn't come as a surprise. Ask yourself what is likely to happen two years from now. Five years? Ten years? What kind of changes can I imagine in my job? My family? My community? This forces you to think in terms of the future, not the past. Next, it's important to see how various changes tie together. On the job. In the home. In the economy. In the energy system. In communications. These are not separate, isolated changes, but inter-related currents that merge to form a single wave. Once we understand that, we can see where the third wave is carrying us. Change becomes much less confusing. Coping is easier.

"There is also clearly a need for lifelong education. You can plug into and out of school for the rest of your life. That's a major way of anticipating change. As we move into electronics, computers, infor-

Quinn: The Unenviable Task
mation services, environmental technologies, aquaculture and all the new third wave industries, businesses will require more people who think, who ask questions, and who adapt and imagine . . .

“ . . . The key resource of the future is not oil, not other forms of natural energy—but the force of our collective imaginations. This force cannot only help us cope with the wave of changes, but could improve our lives and the whole civilization.”

UNequivocably, I say that “YES” our task is UNenviable and yet UNfinished. If we don't do it, who else is going to take out the garbage!

