

The language of media

Mediating cultural change
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One desiring to influence culture must know the language of the media. Such a language has become a common currency that goes well beyond media practitioners and affects every single actor in the social and cultural scene inside and out. Media, with its inexorable technological development, shape attitudes and beliefs and helps to make the ideas broadcast by social actors more consistent, in an environment heavily influenced by instant communication and speed.

Often people with good intentions portray media as something harmful. They draw conclusions from the well-known and rich literature on media effects. However, more than anything else media bring us closer achieving a degree of “togetherness” that enables relationships significantly. There are also other side effects but there are less essential:

“ Today the means of mass communication have made our planet smaller, rapidly narrowing the distance between different peoples and cultures. This “togetherness” at times gives rise to misunderstandings and tensions, yet our ability to know almost instantly about the needs of others challenges us to share their situation and their difficulties. Despite the great advances made in science and technology, each day we see how much suffering there is in the world on account of different kinds of poverty, both material and spiritual. Our times call for a new readiness to assist our neighbors in need. The Second Vatican Council had made this point very clearly: “Now that, through better means of communication, distances between peoples have been almost eliminated, charitable activity can and should embrace all people and all needs” (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 30)

Genuine comprehension of this language implies a profound change in attitudes and perceptions by all those participating in social dialogue in a society like ours heavily influenced by openness and quick access to information. Principals include the immediacy of news, the inescapability of transparency, and the importance of headlines. Few will read the body of the article if the headline doesn't grab him. What grabs people is newsworthiness. So no matter how important the news item, a need to look for the right news angle is a must. First paragraphs are also crucial: media need summaries: more often than not we will need to say it in less words. Those who want to communicate and influence culture have a need to work according to this unique language that asks for precision, newsworthiness, currency and a capacity for synthesis. Somehow, knowledge of this language is a part of the rhetoric training that is needed in the beginning of the century. Often we might be dealing with issues that carry with them the wisdom of centuries and yet clarity and audience understanding are key.

Iconic symbols are another important aspect of media language. Iconic expressions find their way into popular culture, allowing firms and institutions to advance their values and influence the “framing” of persons and organizations alike. In advertising, for example, such symbols give origin to such powerful icons as the brands (Holt, Twitchell). Icons might be particularly helpful when there is a need to explain relatively complex issues.

Mastering the language of media allows organizations to be in the position to be trendsetters. That is not a matter of being many or having large communications tools at disposal.

Often trends are started by relevant minorities that are experts in humanity and thus in communication. Gladwell has described “that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire. Just a single sick person can start an epidemic of the flu, so to can a small but precisely targeted push cause a fashion trend, the popularity of a new product, or a drop in the crime rate”. In his book on Hollywood, Gabler (1988) also showed how a few influential persons had a disproportionate influence in the industry’s development.

The remarkable days that followed the death of John Paul II provide an historic and close example of how news has the capacity to produce a “cycle” with a life of its own. If the event remains newsworthy for a protracted period, it ascends into the realm of historic events, provoking reactions and even instant actions from audiences globally. In the case of John Paul II, a real “globalization of astonishment” occurred.

But in other cases the news cycle could be negative. Organizations must be prepared for a worst-case scenario involving a bad news cycle. It is not sufficient, but rather detrimental to an institution’s image to just ignore the situation; one must respond to it. Frequently, ignoring the situation gives the appearance of covering up, which only worsens one’s public image. Institutions can ready themselves for this contingency by developing a profound situation analysis capacity that will allow them to assess their situation correctly and thereby averting a crisis and develop a winning strategy.

Anyone desirous of having an influence on contemporary thought and opinion must have a good understanding of the different “screens” that rule so many lives Contemporary citizens have at their disposal computer screens, consoles, cell phones, PDAs, etc. Screens, with their ability to broadcast instant information and their potential for human interaction bring with them new opportunities for relationships among persons, beginning with the young, a critical stakeholder that uses media differently and is abandoning “old media” patterns (Mindich, 2004).

With technology new possibilities arise for audience participation. Publics are increasingly active and open new avenues for social mobilization on behalf of social causes. Using these new technologies, civil society can become a bigger participant in the social dialogue, without strong ties to the value system that permeates the largest news organizations. The case for technology-driven change has already been made in the advertising industry by authors like Cappo (2003), Donaton (2004), Auletta (2005) and Jaffe (2005).

Currently media languages in the different platforms tend to integration. Thus those who promote a movie (film) think at the same time of selling its soundtrack (music), advertising it in web pages (Internet) and through TV commercials (advertising and television broadcasting). Finally, they might launch a video game with the movie theme (gaming). All these platforms influence the different audiences and publicize values that lead to a certain world view and give meaning to specific decisions that people make about their lifestyle. The media-generated popular culture, using all the different “screens and platforms” has a unique capacity to produce trends in this society that has been aptly called “entertainment society”, where organizations used to deal with news will increasingly need to deal also with fiction (Wolf, 1999). Effectively using the language of media requires not only knowledge of its rules but also a deep understanding of one’s perceived identity, frequently achieved through extensive research.

The language of media is very much part of contemporary language. It allows to communicate in such a way that understanding among people can be achieved better and messages can be culturally relevant. For its quality as a “lingua franca” for different institutions and causes, media language certainly goes well beyond the media themselves. Influencing culture is a task that requires understanding of media rules and also attention to message form. In this light, they should be briefer (speed being a salient characteristic of contemporary media landscapes), more original and segmented to their different target audiences.

Working with media also requires a good strategic framework and could be considered as a heavily intellectual endeavor in spite of the time pressures involved. Communications planning

can't be underestimated: ordinary scanning of the issues involved in the organizations' identity will lead to a well-designed strategic framework that should give media an accurate yet interesting and newsworthy picture of the institution even when it has been around for centuries. No matter how serious the message an effort is needed to give it the proper tone, without killing creativity (Amabile, 1998).

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