

The Speech Teacher, Persuasion and Mass Communications

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The services of Quintilian, Spanish-born Roman rhetorician, fighter for ethical conduct and good men in speech, are sorely needed today. They are needed to re-expound his guide rules and re-amplify his principles. They are needed vitally. They are needed now. For never in the history of the world are so many being "sold" so much by so few. Through channels of communication undreamed of in Quintilian's time, one person, one message, one argument, is able to reach more people than even existed in the civilized world of 45 A.D. Yes, the electronic revolution has come, radio and television have grown and flourished. But despite the best efforts of men and women within and without the world's communications industries, ethical considerations remain expendable considerations.

Persuasion in today's media is a polished art and a ruthless business. It is created by teams of experts and utilizes every new technique that modern psychology discovers, every chunk of data that space-age computers interpret. Persuasion today can, in one calculated context, sell nine thousand candy bars or deliver nine thousand votes. Through our twentieth century media of mass communications, one message can reach an audience of millions and, when sent as auditory and visual language through the electronic facilities of radio and television, can reach these millions simultaneously.

The potential for mass truth and mass deception, mass benefits and mass injustices, has never been greater. The use of spoken persuasion as a tool of social, political, and economic stimulation has never been more widespread. The need for a common, catholic, and comprehensive system of ethics has never been so necessary, so vital, so desperate.

Transmitted through space, persuasion has taken on a whole new dimension and a frightening new character. Goebbels recognized this character and put it to devastating use in his radio broadcasts, whipping the German people into frenzied and unqualified enthusiasm for the Third Reich and all its schemes. This tradition, this pattern set by the Nazi propagandists, continues to the present day and it is significant to note that in every uprising, in every *coup d'etat*, one of the first insurgent objectives is the local broadcasting facility. Violent testimony to the strategic and tactical importance of radio and television has been evidenced in every corner of the world from Greece to Viet Nam; from Peru to the Brazzaville

Congo. Syrians prick up their ears every time martial music comes pouring through their sets for it generally means another *coup*, another regime, a prelude to another persuasive harangue aimed at the land's masses.

Can there be a more graphic illustration of the modern transfiguration of persuasion? It is no longer merely a town-square tool for winning over small groups of warm bodies. Instead, through twentieth century technology, it can be as natural, as immediate, as striking as a world-wide bolt of lightning.

We can't control lightning, but its scope is narrow. We must cleanse persuasion, for its swath is wide. In a day when a single speech by a single man through a single microphone can send thousands of people to co-operative suicide, the need for a standard, a system, a basic awareness of ethics and ethical considerations has never been more imperative. We can no longer afford the luxury of ignoring our task. Nor can we isolate and restrict these considerations to the platonic, parochial world of the classroom and the pulpit. Ethics today are not solely a matter of logic, philosophy or morality. Rather, they are a matter of prime necessity or, if you will, of practical expediency.

We are no longer isolated farmers tilling pure soils, subject only to the whims of Nature and the occasional blarney of a traveling salesman or shire orator. Those days and that era have passed forever from our shores. Instead, we are cogs, particles and sometimes implements of a complex inter-dependent society, a society of mass men constantly pelted with mass messages. In past times an unethical, unscrupulous persuader was but a local miscreant whose area of impact was no greater than the sound of his voice, no stronger than the legs of his horse. But put that same man before a microphone or a camera today and his twisted words and fancied fallacies can create financial disaster or political ruin for a cross-country competitor; unlimited prominence, unhampered power for himself. If the wily Titus Oates had had access to radio, what might have been the course of Anglo-Saxon liberty? Because Joseph McCarthy did have access to television, the American tributary of that course was temporarily re-channeled to nurture and irrigate a pernicious crop of suspicions, fears, and injustices.

Ethics of persuasion are not merely moot considerations for today's times, they are vital ones! Whether one is an absolutist, relativist, or meliorist is unimportant. What is important is the prudence and the watchfulness each of us, as speech teachers, must exercise in establishing relations with the powerful persuaders who use the mass media. There is no longer time, no longer opportunity for an unhurried, esoteric appraisal of ethical questions as was possible in the communications vacuum of Quintilian's time. Our electronic perfectionism has carried us too far for that. In today's world a whole new artery has been opened to sophistry; an electronic artery which can carry the affliction unto every portion of our globe, every function of our lives. And without the ethical checkpoints, without the ethical stop lights that modern speech theory can and must provide, this artery could well be the road to cultural, economic, and political destruction.

How then, as speech teachers, do we actually approach the problem? The first and key step is to recognize that this problem, this new task, has indeed been placed at our doorstep. Far too many of us view the mass media in general, and the broadcast media in particular, as merely modern substitutes for the carnival or traveling circus. Far too many of us restrict ourselves to the boundaries imposed by our

conventional platform or proscenium and ignore the ever-widening influence of broadcasting in determining our student's speech patterns, styles and values. Far too few of us are willing to accept broadcasting as a vital tool, and a potential ally. Yet, the longer teachers of speech abrogate their responsibility, the longer we retard the natural growth of our discipline into this new communications environment, the less valuable we will come to be to our students, our subject, and our society.

With each passing year the vehicles of mass communications are more and more the purveyors of what becomes standard speech, standard music, and standard political style. As such, these vehicles deserve and demand to be both studied and utilized in the maintenance and furtherance of high-quality speech goals and skills. We are teaching youngsters who are strongly influenced by the broadcast and filmic arts and should train them to analyze and criticize the products of these arts in the same manner and with the same dedication that Quintilian and Cicero applied to the study of the powerful voices of their day.

True, all teachers from all disciplines must in some way come to terms with the electronic media that impinge so decidedly on their professional and private lives, but it is speech teachers especially who must define these terms in relation to the communicative skills and precepts which they themselves attempt to pass on. Education in general and speech education in particular is now dealing with children who are far more performance-orientated than were their pre-TV cousins. This condition can be positively utilized in the classroom and on the platform if the speech teacher is acquainted with the operations of today's most pervasive forum. By stressing common principles and discussing opposing standards, the teacher will find the media to provide reinforcement rather than contradiction.

Some universities, such as the one with which the author is affiliated, can provide complete undergraduate and graduate degree programs in mass communications and require students in other speech areas (public address, interpretative reading, theatre) to elect certain introductory courses in broadcasting technique and criticism. In this way, graduates in each speech discipline have acquired at least a basic understanding of mass communications and its relationship to their specialization. Many times, students and teachers themselves build false dichotomies between the theory of the classroom and the practice of the tube. When backed by a first-hand knowledge of broadcasting's idiosyncrasies, however, the professionally-trained speech teacher can often transform the seeming contradiction into a mutually applicable maxim which thereby strengthens his instruction and broadens its scope.

Still, a speech teacher need not depend solely on university training to help him understand the broadcast media. If such instruction is unavailable, there is a great deal that can be accomplished through a conscientious program of self study. Gerald Millerson's *The Technique of Television Production*, for example, can provide a comprehensive view of the technical considerations which, in television, serve to modify traditional dramatic and forensic principles. By projecting these principles into the television situation, the speech or drama teacher will not only provide his students with new perspectives on the broadcast media, but also will make classroom exposition and practice seem more vital and more relevant to rostrum, stage, and studio.

Of greater importance to our central responsibility as speech teachers would be anthologies such as Alan Casty's *Mass Media and Mass Man* which go beyond mere technical considerations to illuminate broadcasting's social and moral ramifications. It is in these anthologies, in the collected observations of scores of mass communications' most careful researchers and eloquent critics, that we as speech teachers can find new applications for and new challenges to persuasion's ethical heritage. The truly professional speech teacher cannot fail to meet these challenges if his discipline and his practicing of it are to retain the admirable influence and honorable intent which has been the hallmark of our field since Quintilian's time. By discriminative reading, one can acquire a basic conversance with the technology, potentials, and perils intrinsic to mass communications. By alert viewing and listening, the speech teacher can combine this conversance with his own past training in order to arrive at professional judgments. By bringing these judgments into his teaching, the instructor of speech can guide his students to appreciate, evaluate, and safeguard the articulation of truth through the new media as well as the old.

SOME SUGGESTED READINGS FOR SPEECH TEACHERS

I. *Technical*

- Baddeley, W. Hugh. *The Technique of Documentary Film Production* (London: Focal Press Limited, 1963).
- Dolan, Robert Emmett. *Music in Modern Media* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1967).
- Hyde, Stuart W. *Television and Radio Announcing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959).
- Millerson, Gerald. *The Technique of Television Production* (London: Focal Press Limited, 1961).
- Willis, Edgar E. *Writing Television and Radio Programs*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1967).
- Zettl, Herbert. *Television Production Handbook*. Second Edition (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1968).

II. *Theory and Criticism*

- Casty, Alan (ed.). *Mass Media and Mass Man* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968).
- DeFleur, Melvin L. *Theories of Mass Communications* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966).
- Dexter, Lewis A., and White, David Manning (eds.). *People, Society, and Mass Communications* (London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1964).
- Klapp, Orin E. *Symbolic Leaders* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1964).
- Peterson, Theodore, Jensen, Jay W., and Rivers, William L. *The Mass Media and Modern Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1965).
- Rosenberg, Bernard, and White, David Manning (eds.). *Mass Culture* (London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1957).

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