Who Turned the Filet Mignon into Chopped Meat?

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BEING ENMESHED in the New York rat race—or guinea pig race, since we seem to be a laboratory of sorts, undergoing experiments in problem-solving—I find it easy to tune in to the surging crises that envelop us and threaten, even, to destroy us.

So it sometimes is difficult to realize that where we sit, on top of a keg of TNT, is still far removed from the concerns of so many of us. And I suppose this is part of the problem—the problem of apathy, apathy in the face of a communications avalanche.

We have in this country about 1,800 newspapers, nearly 900 news syndicates, about 6,300 AM and FM radio stations in operation, or preparing to operate, 660 TV stations, and the thousands of magazines. What Marshall McLuhan calls the "television environment" has, in his words, "altered every phase of the American vision and identity." Or so we like to say. But has it, really?

More and more, I think that our vision and identity is not responding, or coming into focus, despite the information that media feeds into us. I say this sadly, after listening to the man-in-the-street opinions that now get free radio air time on various stations in town, and as a devoted reader of letters-to-the-editor columns, as a less-devoted recipient of such letters, and as one who can't help overhearing conversations around us.

This may be due to the shortcomings of media—not making itself understood; not trying hard enough to present stories in meaningful ways; or else it's a failure on the part of those of us who grew up in a non-television environment, before 1948; our failure to adjust our biases, or ability to digest new information to the global scene. Here's some information we haven't really digested as yet: Remember when General Eisenhower became president in 1953? Our U.S. population was less than 160,000,000.

By next year, it will be 207,000,000, or nearly 50,000,000 more people—one-third of our country's population of 17 years ago. How does that grab you?

This may be one explanation of our celebrated generation gap. The new guys may be more resilient, better at reacting to the inputs of our burgeoning society, being more used to the assaults of media.

How Communications May Fail

Here's an example of communications not really getting through properly: Riding a Penn Central train to my suburb one evening recently, there were three women seated behind me. An elderly woman, her middle-aged daughter, and a relative who had met them in Grand Central when they pulled in from Syracuse. As I said, I can't help overhearing conversation. The train came out of the tunnel, into Harlem—notorious Harlem—and the lady next to the window looked out and saw a block of grimy tenements, all vacant, windows gone, roofs torn out, walls broken. "Oh," she said, "here's where they had the riots. Look at that, all burned down."

What she was looking at, of course, was the start of another block renewal project in Harlem. No riot, no fire. It's what we call progress—the rebuilding of a terrible ghetto in this city. Where did she get the notion that what she was seeing with her very own eyes was the aftermath of a riot? Surely, she's got one of the 94,000,000 TV sets in the U.S. And I suppose she owns one of the 225,000,000 radios. Surely, she's reading newspapers and magazines and she considers herself literate, probably well-informed.

Yes, we're really communicating, but she still sees what she wants to see, or what she has been conditioned to see. Media has conditioned her, or it has conditioned those who influence her. Isn't it supposed to inform, too?

Because the stakes are so high these days, I think we had all better take a little look at what's happening with our communications. For, like Cool Hand Luke, I'm afraid what we have here is a failure to communicate.

When I was going to school, planning on a career in journalism —it was journalism then, not communications—our role was defined as being the same as the ideal historian of Don Quixote's

time—we were to be "exact, truthful, and absolutely unprejudiced, so that neither interest nor fear, dislike nor affection, should make them turn from the path of truth."

Well, now we wonder where the truth is. Experience has taught us that being absolutely unprejudiced—objective—is no longer possible. The press, whether it likes it or not, is involved. It is human. It is powerful and it is vulnerable. Just listen to the attacks on it—and who is making them—and you will see that we've no place to hide. We're in the kitchen and we're feeling heat. Bill Moyers, now the publisher of Newsday and the former White House aide to President Johnson, said that the greatest myth about the press is its objectivity. But even before then, C. Wright Mills wrote about media as follows:

"They guide our very experiences. They have not only filtered into our experience of external realities, they have also entered into our very existence of our own selves."

Okay. That's what we like to hear. The press participates and shapes existence. It is no longer the innocent bystander. But isn't that being a bit smug? Remember, too, Mart Twain saying how he never let his schooling interfere with his education? Well, never let communications interfere with your education. We must keep striving for an honest subjectivity. Make your biases clear to your reader, though. Don't try to trap him. And as we become more and more involved in the complex issues and affairs of our time, we must use perspective, not fan flames and passions. We must uphold, always, through it all, the need for orderly procedures. Media mustn't panic, no matter the provocation. We must try harder I suppose.

Serious Approach Needed

I guess what I'm saying is that if we're going to communicate, we ought to be serious about it, every step of the way. Unfortunately, we seem to be in one of those periods where the more serious the events, the less serious media wants to be. Newspapers talk about entertaining readers, to compete with TV and magazines. Here's a release we received the other day from UPI, New York: It tells of a new feature—"good news roundups" —periodic wrapups of good news. One item told of students who were raising $100,000 to help people who sustain injuries or suffering from crime. Another item told about a Marine who twice had

grenades tossed at him in Viet Nam. One was a dud. Another he caught and threw back. The item ends: "The explosion knocked him over but he survived."

We're looking to balance the news, not to serve it up as it comes. Maybe that's why that lady from Syracuse is so unaffected.

Here's another quote that relates to this subject. "I really shudder when I read a description of a new feature about to be launched by some newspaper syndicate and they refer to it as 'off-beat.' It is time we have some new features which are 'on-beat,' and which are about real people doing real things."

The author of that quote is Charles M. Schultz, creator of that all-time real-people feature, the "Peanuts" comic strip.

As one who used to work at UPI writing off-beat features, I guess I sound as if I've reached the age of repentance. Not that I regret writing a column that was called "Time-Out." It was fun. And the times were different. The lead-in went like this: "Time-Out. Time out from the heavy headlines. Time out for a story about . . . and we describe some off-beat subject."

And then, speaking of the off-beat, I did television reviews for UPI. For two-and-a-half years, each night, I'd watch TV for long hours at home and, long about 11 p.m., write my reviews. To get it filed, UPI installed a teletype machine in my house. At first, the union wanted to send a man to my house each night to punch the story, but they couldn't get any volunteers, so I was told, and they permitted me to do the punching and the contract violating. All for the cause of the off-beat.

Where Does Advertising Fit?

But when it comes to the off-beat, here I am, executive editor, for crying out loud, of *Advertising Age*, reporting each week on the news about advertising and marketing. Advertising news? You might ask. What has that got to do with being serious about anything, let alone the state of the world?

The fact is that the world sees advertising all around it; as we say, people, willy-nilly, become enmeshed in the hocus-pocus of the nitty-gritty marketplace. People do respond to ads and the commercials. Broadcast and print media are shaped by advertising, and vice versa. Newspapers and magazines die when the advertising revenue dwindles. Radio stations turn all

sorts of somersaults to find a format that will pull in listeners—and advertisers.

We deal with questions of taste in programs. And should cigarettes be advertised on radio and TV? That gets us to who owns the airwaves: The people, the advertisers, the stockholders, the federal government? And what about Pay-TV? What happens when poor people, unable to afford Pay-TV programming, find themselves relegated to second-class citizenship in front of tired old TV tubes and re-re-re-re-runs of "I Love Lucy?" And will community antenna television affect us? Will the ability to direct one program and commercial into my house and another program and commercial into my neighbor's house have any impact? You bet your bippy! Especially when you're able to "talk back" to the studio, or the advertiser. Press a button and tell them what you think of the show. Next? Press a button and order that frozen food they're advertising on TV. Or slip that plastic credit card into the slot in the TV set and buy something—a machine at the other end fills the order and bills you later. Educational TV? Another huge untapped medium—especially for your work, it seems.

So we cover advertising and take it seriously. Blacks start a boycott against Procter & Gamble or Lever Bros. We cover that story. We find ourselves talking to the civil rights people, see them merge with consumer groups and bring a new militancy into the marketplace. Ad agencies respond to the troubles of our times. They open their doors to blacks and Puerto Ricans and train them for jobs. They take functional illiterates, school drop-outs, and actually teach them to read and write and function in an office with $85-a-week jobs and room for advancement. Clients demand that commercials show black faces. General Foods sponsors "Julia" on network TV—a cornball situation comedy, but it's about a black woman and her small son. The Ku Klux Klan organizes a boycott of General Foods products. When I was reviewing TV, it was fashionable to blame TV's blandness on the sponsors—they didn't want anything sharp or controversial. Did you notice that it was CBS—not the sponsors—who cancelled the Smothers Brothers for being too sharp? The show had six sponsors on the books for the next season and at least two others about to sign. Yes, times they are a-changing.

Each week, then, we set out to serve our readers filet mignon. The choicest story cuts: stuff that will set them to thinking, help

them become more effective, make more money. Eastern Airlines said, "We want everyone to fly." We say, in effect, "We want everyone to be hip." But do we always serve filet mignon? Often, we run out of time. Somebody is sick, misses work, and we miss a story. Or we're in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or press agents keep us too long on the phone and we miss calls from people who can really give us news. So at the end of the week, instead of filet mignon we're dishing out some chopped meat. Yes, it's still nourishing, but it's not what our menu called for.

Study Media Needs

Okay. We want to serve filet mignon. You want to serve filet mignon. And you want to help us—the guys on the media side —prepare the meal. How can you do this more effectively? You can be serious about the publications you deal with, or want to deal with. Go through each issue carefully, note how they angle stories, see what's changing, see what kind of feature material they use. After you've done this for an extended stretch, you'll see material on your desk, or within reach, that can be fitted to those needs more precisely.

You wouldn't call on *Ad Age* with a story about an antique show. But if one of the exhibitors is a v.p. at an ad agency and he's got a fine collection of old trolley car posters, why, *Ad Age* should be interested. And if there's no angle, you don't try to tug and pull and make one up. We're all too busy for that. You also get to know the editors, or an editor, on the publications, so that when you have a story idea to present, you can do it quickly. And fully. Always present the idea as completely as possible. Let the editor in on all the pros and cons, don't make him find out for himself that there's a con-side. Let him know if it's an exclusive story, or part of a general release. And if it's a general release, is there any part of it, any extra stuff, that can be exclusive to him?

Find out how the subscribers read the publication. How is it used? Who are the readers? Check this with Standard Rate & Data's information. We like to tell our assorted readers things that they otherwise would never know.

As for writing style, I believe in rewriting press releases that survive our morning meetings. This means the chap who has

worked hard to make the release witty, clever, dazzling to the reader—he has wasted his time. I like to think more and more publications do their own writing. Anyhow, just lay the facts on us; never mind the writing style. If you can, discover which publications work this way; it'll save you a lot of time . . . and disappointment.

We like to check out our press releases, to make sure they're legit, and also to see if there's more to the story. An example: A release tells us merely that Herbert Sand, formerly v.p.-sales, Ideal Toy Corp., has been named to the new position of exec. v.p.-marketing. Our reporter wants to learn about his successor. When he gets through with the phone call, he's got a story about Ideal's restructured marketing department, with five other executives involved, all with new titles and duties. Ideal had planned to feed us one name a week for six weeks, I suppose. We prefer to get the whole story in one shot, whenever we can. It's a small example, but I think it illustrates what I'm getting at. We try to look deeply into press releases, to see what they tell us and also what they're not telling us.

Ad Agencies May Be Helpful

As for ad agencies, I'm sure that advertising agencies are operating near where you all live and work. If you're not in touch with some of them, you should be. Sometimes an agency has a client who can benefit from your information, perhaps build a campaign around it. You may even interest some of the agency people in special projects involving rural development activities. With their knowledge of media, they can be helpful. They may be able to guide you, informally, on media choices. They know what's going on in media—when to use outdoor posters, or direct mail, or mail order, or radio, newspapers, magazines, TV, matchbook covers, or whatever.

I mention ad agencies because you should know that admen are always struggling with an image problem. They want to clamp that halo of respectability around those long sideburns. Tying in with some of your projects can help them as well as you. And most of them are articulate and fairly bright; they get around and occasionally have good ideas.

Another point I want to leave with you involves consumerism. It seems to me that the times are right for your work. Wherever

consumerism is the subject—and it's all about—your people should be there, on the panels, or represented in print, relating your knowledge and experience to the urban scene.

Look deeply into all the magazines, the mass circulation books, the special books, that appear to be seeking material about consumer interests. I see that *Better Homes & Gardens* is moving more into the tips-for-household and family management. The entire subject seems to be opening up, presenting you with vast opportunities to tell your story.

Plenty Room for Improvement

I suppose my point is that we've got a lot of communications going, but there's lots of room for qualitative improvement. Are we presenting the forests as well as the trees? Are we confronting attitudes—including our own—making people think hard, question their long-held biases, and our own as well? We can help to reach people by being more serious about our work and the forms in which we present it. We're under attack because people don't really understand the role of the press. We must do more to set our critics straight, not leave it to the federal agencies and courts to state our case.

We've got to master each medium; know everything about the material we're working with, including the demographics of our audiences, their life-styles. We must always strive to sharpen our technical skills, the use of new graphics, electronics, words and pictures, and colors. We've got to be professionals, always, and we must scorn the corrupters of media, both inside and outside our fields of interest. These are some of the ways in which we can communicate more effectively to our publics—and get our message through to that little old lady from Syracuse.

The name of the game, I guess, is self-improvement. If enough of us get better at our jobs, we'll upgrade the whole scene. We'll make a stronger contribution to the betterment, not the befuddlement, of our society. As we say: Let 'em eat filet mignon.