Proxemics And Television:  
The Politician's Dilemma

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In 1973 a news cameraman in southern Texas shot footage showing the open graves of the victims of a mass murderer. Regional television newscasts made extensive use of this footage. Although the stations may have presented the material in the spirit of informing the public, many viewers received the newscasts in their homes as being inappropriate for general viewing. In the same way, many people objected to the intimacy involved in the recording of the Viet Nam war. While several explanations could account for the reactions of the public to these newscasts, one is particularly relevant to the focus of this article. That explanation relates to the invasion of the spatial privacy of the viewer. Unlike the filmed recordings of the first and second world wars, which generally were shown in movie theatres, the Viet Nam material was dumped uninvited into the home.

This kind of concern regarding the capacity of television to violate the conventions of "good taste" by conveying material inappropriate to the territory within which it is being received have been expressed on many occasions in a popular context. A second area of concern, equally serious in its implications for the parties involved, has not been so much recognized or explored. This concern relates to the potential in television to invade the spatial privacy of the communicator.

In discussing television's capacity to invade the personal space zones of the communicator, it is useful to apply Edward Hall's proxemic zones to television's handling of distances. These four zones are intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance. According to Hall, for Western cultures intimate distance involves approximately six to eighteen inches; personal distance, one and a half to four feet; social distance, four to twelve feet; and public distance, twelve to twenty-five feet.

In looking at communication situations involving television, it might be useful to coin the term "optical
Invasion of privacy by the media grows out of the nature of television.

It is useful to note the difference in the way that an observer physically present at an event examines the event and the manner in which a media director records the event.

The observer present at the actual event changes his center of attention to examine different aspects of the event, but the scale of the event does not alter his perceptual frame. He disregards detail not relevant to his center of attention, even though this detail still remains in his frame.

The media director, on the other hand, has no way of focusing attention on one aspect of the event, other than by observing that aspect discretely and by ignoring surrounding detail. This emphasis he achieves by close-up shots of the detail to which he wishes to direct attention.

Arnheim discussed the dilemma of the film director in the following way:

It is utterly false for certain theorists, and some practitioners, of the motion picture to assert that the circumscribed picture on the screen is an image of our circumscribed view in real life. That is poor psychology. The limitations of a film picture and the limitations of sight cannot be compared because in the actual range of human vision the limitation simply does not exist. The field of vision is in practice unlimited and infinite. A whole room may be taken as a continuous field of vision, although our eyes cannot survey this room from a single position, for while we are looking at anything our gaze is not fixed but moving. Because our head and eyes move we visualize the entire room as an unbroken whole...The range of the picture is related to the distance of the camera from the object. The smaller the section of real life to be brought into the picture, the nearer the camera must be to the object, and the larger the object in question comes...
out in the picture—and vice versa. If a whole group of people is to be photographed, the camera must be placed several yards away. If only a single hand is to be shown, the camera must be very close, otherwise other objects besides the hand will appear in the picture. By this means the hand comes out enormously large and extends over the whole screen. Thus the camera, like a man who can move freely, is able to look at an object from close to or from a distance. (4)

When a television or movie camera gives a close-up view of part of an event, the viewer has, in effect, been transported very much closer to the event. Indeed he would have to be inside the intimate zone to observe the types of details offered in close-up shots. The rapid cutting together of different details of the event, as viewed from different distances, is tantamount to the viewer's being rapidly projected back and forth in space. In fact, the viewpoint is changed every few seconds, with ten seconds being considered a long time to hold a particular shot. If the event being observed involves speech communication, the personal distance between the observer and the communicator may alter markedly many times in a short space of time. Because the communicator will not be aware of any transgressions against spatial conventions, he is passive in the situation.

In this transaction, the viewer has the advantage over the actor in the event. The viewer may be transported to a point of spatial intimacy very much closer than is assumed by the actor in his interaction with the medium or with a live audience. The viewer has access to large amounts of nonverbal information that he is then free to interpret or to misinterpret. Viewed from a tight close-up position, a trivial nervous gesture or sign of perspiration may be interpreted as sinister, out of proportion to the communication context within which the speaker assumes himself to be. In such a case, it can very realistically be said that television is invading the spatial privacy of the communicator.

Although Ioannides focused on the advantages rather than the disadvantages of the new proxemics of television, in an article on body language and television, he made interesting commentary on the significance of the medium's potential to invade the private zones of communicators:

By using slow or quick motion techniques, superimposition and split screen, it can illustrate body and face from
different angles, perspectives and distances simultaneously. No cubist painter has ever achieved such a synthesis of aspects and angles in a single picture. This inherent possibility enable TV producers, if they so wish, to underline with close-ups or extreme close-ups and to comment on body language signals. They can also use them to unmask and reveal the real feelings and thoughts of their guests. An example can illustrate this possibility: the face of a guest is dominating on the screen; he talks or listens; he looks self-confident. On one of the preview monitors, the director of the show notices that his guest's hands are nervously playing with his handkerchief, or that his feet, underneath the table, are shuffling. He tilts the camera down, or cuts, or superimposes the hands or the feet. And suddenly the "idol" of the self-confident man is smashed. (5)

The safest response may be personal and intimate distance

Because of the size of a television receiver screen, subjects being televised generally are portrayed by shots of sufficiently close range to show significant detail. In other words, the cameraman shoots the actor in preference to the setting, except where the setting is an essential part of the communication, as in the theatrical presentation. The opportunity to offer a ringside seat to an event is regarded as one of the advantages of television. For this reason, the television director uses panoramic shots to establish a setting and a series of close shots to record the event.

The communicator in a television event who is being observed by the camera usually can assume that he is being observed at close range. Thus, his safest approach to the television environment may be to assume that he is acting within personal or intimate distance of his audience and to rely on the nonverbal style of delivery most appropriate to such proxemic zones. Gestures or body movement that characterize the actor in a theatre or the public speaker will appear exaggerated, affected, or even ludicrous on television. In the vernacular of the theatre, such techniques give the impression of a "ham" performance. Actors making the transition from the stage to television frequently make such a mistake of overacting.

Emory Bogardus commented that television necessitated a change in the political party speeches. After the televising of the first U.S. presidential party conventions, speeches became shorter. Strong emotional appeals in speeches came about because the "emotional methods showed up on the screen to the disadvantage of those who indulged
Dan Hahn observed that this was true because "what seems to a supporter to be an honest out-pouring of emotion seems like acting to the unconvinced". There is now much discussion in Canada regarding the new dynamics generated by the introduction of cameras into parliamentary proceedings.

Audio Distance - distance without amplification of sound

The first part of this article has dealt with "optical distances" and visual aspects of the spatial mobility of the media. Next it is useful to discuss "audio distances". "Audio distance" is intended to refer to the physical distance that the receiver would have to be from the communicator in order to receive the message at the same volume without amplification that he is receiving it with amplification.

Just as a communicator may behave inappropriately for the medium in which he is operating in terms of the "optical distance" separating him from his audience, he may also behave inappropriately in terms of "audio distance". The ancient orator had to project in a communication mode suitable to a large audience. He did not have the benefit of voice amplification, and his style and manner of delivery lacked the tone of intimacy that became possible with forms of electronic address. This was inevitable, as it is difficult to shout intimately. Yet in a manner characteristic of accommodation of innovation, when voice amplification did become possible, both the designers and the users of the system frequently overlooked the implications in the systems for a new mode of address. Even at the present time, those who make use of electronic amplification systems often place a microphone in front of an event and a battery of loudspeakers on either side of the event. What such an approach does, in effect, is to give the event a louder voice. The need for a loud voice is an inheritance from pre-amplification days.

Using electronic amplification in such a way as to exploit the characteristics of the medium entails breaking the audience down into a number of small groups, each served by a relatively low-powered loudspeaker. The approach is to address a large number of small audiences, rather than to welcome the possibility of increasing the size of the audience. Because the area served by any loudspeaker is limited, its level of volume need only be modest.

While a low level of volume, a more intimate type of
communication becomes possible. Operating in such a situation, people who make use of a low key or intimate delivery may have an advantage. Such people are commonly said to have "good microphone technique".

In terms of the audio content of the communication event, the communicator will always be operating in the intimate audio zone. Also, regardless of the immediate setting in which the communicator is operating, his audience will be receiving him, in most cases, in the intimate territory of their homes. Such a setting for the transaction favors an intimate style of delivery, and such a style is likely not only to be most appropriate, but also most effective.

As has already been observed, the communicator cannot know or control the visual content of the communication. The camera's manipulation of the optical space may change the apparent personal distance separating him from his audience many times. However, the conventions of television production are such that close shots are more common than wide shots, and people perceive the idea of a "ringside seat" to be one of the advantages of television viewing. Thus, the communicator may be wise to strive for a nonverbal style suitable for intimate personal space interactions.

If the proposition that an intimate delivery and nonverbal style is most appropriate to the medium of television, then not only will the physical elements of the communication be bound by the demands of intimate address, but also the content and language of the communication must conform to such criteria.

Very early in the history of television, Neil Postman made a very insightful commentary that has relevance today for the political communicator. He said:

It would appear that television's most natural and compelling resource is its ability to communicate ideas and reveal events and people with a sense of intimacy and truthfulness. Perhaps the single most important characteristic shared by such television "personalities" as Arthur Godfrey, Jack Paar, Dave Garroway, Chet Huntley, David Brinkley, Edward R. Murrow, Eric Severeid, Garry Moore, Arlene Frances and Mike Wallace is that they are not typical "show business" people. Neither do they appear to be actors in a theatrical sense. They "play" themselves, and when their performances approach the histrionic, as occasionally
in the case of Leonard Bernstein, there is a corresponding loss in effectiveness for many viewers. Another way of saying this is that on television, the untheatrical frequently tends to be more believable and more dramatic than the theatrical. This is an aesthetic principle which candidates for office ignore at their peril. (9)

In one of his early films "This is Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Massage," McLuhan made this same point. He observed that the television medium would necessitate the emergence of a new kind of politician, one who is more flexible and more casual. (10) The styles of both Pierre Trudeau and Jimmy Carter reflect this new kind of politician. Whether Trudeau's and Carter's images are part of a conscious adaptation to the demands of television or whether these men survived because their natural style was best-suited to the new medium is, in a sense, irrelevant to this discussion. The important point is that these two men, who hold the highest political office in their respective countries, have strong characteristics in common in terms of political style. It is our contention that this is not accidental; as observed by both Postman and McLuhan, it was highly predictable.

The very rapid technological development of television has tended to draw attention from the fact that television is still a very young tentative medium. In the same way as with any other social innovation, conventions of the past carry over and inhibit the appropriate utilization of the innovation. For example, in retrospect, the acting in the early motion pictures seems exaggerated to the point of the grotesque. Proxemic conventions of the theatre were carried over into film. Early film audiences were not disturbed by the exaggeration; however, as the audiences became more trained in the techniques of film, new levels of expertise were required of the actors and the producers.

In the same way, today's television audiences have become very much more discriminating than the audiences of the 1950's. For example, public reaction to Ted Kennedy's Chappaquiddick address and to Nixon's appeals to public sympathy in 1974 was very different from the public's response to similar appeals in the 1950's. The more recent appeals were very quickly identified as spectres of Nixon's earlier "Checkers" address and Truman's apologia and were classified as attempts to manipulate and to deceive. Opinion polls showed a strong negative reaction to the television addresses. (11)
This same point is made by John Leonard who observed:

Television creates style as much as it records it. Crybabyism was perfect for the Fifties, from Nixon with his Checkers speech to Jack Paar and his fat daughter to Charles Van Doren and Dave Garroway sob-ridden at what President Eisenhower called "a terrible thing to do to the American public": that is, cheating. The Sixties, as Teddy Kennedy found out after he tried to explain Chappaquiddick on television to an unbelieving public, required something more than squeezing your sincerity like a lemon.(12)

Today's television audiences have been exposed for more than twenty years to the techniques of persuasive communica- tion through the ubiquitous television commercial. They have learned to associate the familiar, repetitious message with the selling of soap powder. Barry Farrell, writing for Life magazine in 1969 observed:

First came the incantations to the gods of commerce: Shower to Shower body powder, Kal Kan dog food, Brut cologne, TV Guide. Then Ted's face, Ted's grave look, Ted holding the electric rein on 35 million watchers.(13)

There are strong indications that when the same techniques used to sell dog food surface in the marketing of a President, the television audience will find them incredible and distasteful. Bagdikian noted that there are enough media campaigns that have failed in recent years to support the proposition that audiences today are not so susceptible to the methods of the mass media. He stated:

Skilled exploiters of television have been voted down on enough occasions to sustain hope. The "television generation" of the 1960's is characterized by a degree of skepticism about television campaigning bordering on the cynical.(14)

Similarly, television audiences have become educated in the proxemics of the medium. In the same way that they can identify the actor who is ill-adapted to the medium, they take note of the communicator who presents his message in a public mode to the intimate eye of the television camera. No less than with the actor, the political communicator runs the risk of having his actions appear exaggerated and contrived to the viewer who has come to expect a better performance from the users of the medium.
The actor moving from the live theatre stage to the television studio must take pains to re-learn his craft, according to the new demands of the medium. The politician must also have a good understanding of the nature of the medium in which he is working, and he must behave in a manner appropriate to the medium. The demands on the politician may in some ways be greater than those made on the actor. The actor has to adopt a technique appropriate to the medium in which he is working at the moment. The politician, on the other hand, may frequently be operating in two media simultaneously. The public address which is being televised may make conflicting demands on the communicator. Understanding the nature of television and the influence of proxemics on interpersonal transactions may be starting point for exploring more appropriate and effective ways of using television. (15)

NOTES

1. One explanation for this reaction may be that while movie theatres may be regarded as public territorial zones, a person's home is private territory. Distinctions of this nature have been made in studies such as the one by L.M. Lyman and M.B. Scott, "Territoriality: A Neglected Sociological Dimension," Social Problems 15 (1967), pp. 236-249.

2. Edward T. Hall, The Hidden Dimension (Garden City, N.Y. 1966), pp. 117-125. In "Toward a Theory of Personal Space Expectations and Their Violations," Human Communication Research 2 (Winter, 1976), p. 134, Judee K. Burgoon and Stephen B. Jones note that while there appears to be reason to believe that the actual distances cited by Hall are inaccurate, the "relative distances appear sound."

3. In 1967 R.F. Priest and J. Sawyer, "Proximity and Peership: Bases of Balance in Interpersonal Attraction," The American Journal of Sociology 72 (1967), p. 647, drew a similar kind of distinction between actual and perceived proxemic space. They used the term "phenomenal distance" to indicate the perceived distance between the interactants in a communication situation. This distance was a psychic, rather than a physical distance.


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8. As early as 1915, James Winans, *Public Speaking* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1915), advocated a natural conversational style, and most communication theorists since Winans have agreed on some kind of level with his views. Nonetheless, there is a lingering nostalgia for the style of the classical oration. The strength of the appeal of the classical school can be seen in excerpts such as the following from E. Christian Buehler and Wil A. Linkugel, *Speech Communication* (New York, 1969), p. 83: "A second influence upon the decline of skill in delivery was marked by the coming of radio, loud speakers, recording devices, and the television camera. Microphone speaking caused drastic modifications in both the techniques of vocal projection and style of delivery. Speakers now became glued to the microphone, and bodily action was sharply reduced. The accomplished platform speaker, before the day of the microphone, was able to project his voice to hundreds, and even thousands of listeners. Today, most speakers cannot be adequately heard in a large room unless they have a microphone. Gestures were of no consequence to a speech delivered on the radio, and the television camera often focuses on the speaker's face so that his gestures are not seen."


10. Marshall McLuhan, "This is Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Massage" Film.

11. Sherry Devereaux Butler, "The Apologia: 1971 Genre", *Southern Speech Journal* (1972). Also the film "Television and Politics" shows numerous examples of persuasive technique used by politicians. Although these techniques were considered to be effective at the time, they appear ludicrous and grotesque, viewed in retrospect. This film very effectively demonstrates the rapid change in the level of sophistication of television viewers over the past 20-25 years.


15. Garrett O'Keefe, "Political Campaigns and Mass Communications Research," in *Political Communication: Issues and Strategies for Research*, edited by Steven H. Chaffee Beverly Hills, Calif., 1975), pp. 139-141, has proposed that one of the areas we should study is "cognitive effects of campaign communications." He says that, increasingly, concepts that are rooted in the psychology of cognition "have been making their way more and more into the political communication literature."