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ETHOS, CREDIBILITY AND COMMUNICATION

IN THE REAL WORLD*

James C. McCroskey

Since the topic of one of the chapters of my book is Ethos, or source credibility, and since most of you here have been examined over that, I do not think that I will waste your time by telling you some of the same things that you have already read; rather, I would like to talk about some ideas relating to source credibility that are not in the book.

I approached source credibility in that book primarily as a tool for a communicator to use; saying that if you have credibility with an audience, you will influence that audience; if you do not have credibility with them, you tend to have a relatively minimal impact. The research in this area is probably the clearest of any research that exists in the field of communication, almost all the studies come out with the same conclusion: A high credibility source produces more attitude change or behavior than does a low credibility source. I am sure most of you probably remember the classic study by Haiman at Northwestern where he presented the same speech to three groups of students.¹ He told one group the speaker was a surgeon general of the U.S., he told another one that he was a Northwestern University sophomore, and a third group that he was a secretary general of the American Communist party, and to no one's shock or amazement, the surgeon general was more effective in getting people to accept the idea of socialized medicine than was the University sophomore or the Communist. That basic study has been replicated many times with different sources, different topics, and different audiences; it has been done with groups of college students, it has been done with high school groups, it has been done in a small group setting, it has been done in a mass audience setting, it has been done with adults, male and female, and so forth. The results almost invariably are the same, except in a few studies where the research was so badly designed the researcher could not find any difference even though it was probably there.

This group of studies, of course, was looking at things that almost everybody would consider relevant, that is, if a person is a Communist talking about socialized medicine, somehow that is relevant to whether or not he is for socialized medicine. It is a socialistic type program, ergo Communist affiliation is related. Or if a person is talking about capital punishment and he is an ex-murderer, we should not be terribly surprised that he is against capital punishment; we may consider him to be somewhat of an expert on it since he may have faced it, but we tend to put his character down.

*Text of a speech presented at the University of North Carolina Speech Festival, December, 1969.

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There has also been quite a bit of research on what I call "objectively irrelevant" factors of credibility. You may recall a piece of research by Mills and Aronson.² They did what I call the "pretty-girl/ugly-girl" study. This study is particularly fascinating because it related to something that was being considered objectively irrelevant. Whether or not a girl is attractive or unattractive should have no bearing upon whether or not we agree with her position. If she says something is true, what she looks like really should not make any difference. Nevertheless, in their study, Mills and Aronson found that it did make a difference. What they did was to take a group of college students who were in psychology classes which required them to participate in an experiment. They told the students that they were developing a new attitude measure and wanted the students to fill out the instrument. They indicated that in the past they had found that if somebody read the question and explained what he thought the question meant, that they got more valid data, so they requested a volunteer to read the questions. In each condition the same girl was selected as the volunteer, she read each question and then gave her view as to how people should respond to it. In one case the girl, who apparently was an intrinsically attractive girl, was made up to look very nice, and in the other condition they made the girl really look bad. The experimental subjects were all male college students, and when the pretty girl said that we should all agree with this because it is true, the boys tended to agree, but when the ugly girl said the same thing they tended to take the opposite position. If she was for it, then obviously it was bad because she was ugly and ugly people just do not have good ideas--this kind of reaction.

The results of this study and several others of the same type indicate that source credibility is certainly an extremely complex phenomenon. Some people in speech feel that they and people in psychology and sociology are the ones that are doing all the research on ethos or credibility. Actually, some of the most significant research on credibility is not published. It is the research done by the practicing politician. The reason that this research is so significant is because the practicing politician looks at credibility as not something to be used but something to be attained. A political contest is in essence a contest in credibility and the audience will vote for the person at election time whom they perceive to be the most credible. The voters define what credible is, so the strategy for the politician is to find out what the audience wants and identify himself with those wants and needs. Obviously there are ethical considerations that come in here, but let us disregard them for the time being - many politicians do.

What does a politician do if he has enough money? He will get a pollster to find out what the attitudes of the people are. Following the consistency theories, I am sure you are familiar with those, if a person speaks in favor of something the audience favors, what does the audience do in terms of their attitude toward the speaker? They will increase it. This is why you will rarely find, in a campaign year at least, a politician advocating something to which the majority of his constituents are opposed. This would be a rare event, something that would qualify that candidate for the second volume of Kennedy's Profiles in Courage, but not for one of the political leaders of society. We see the phenomenon then in our everyday politics, such as Senator Gore's

recently proposed amendment to the Senate tax bill. Senator Gore faces a very tough re-election campaign in Tennessee, and he knows that almost everybody in Tennessee and elsewhere feels that taxes are too high. What could he do better to gain friends and supporters than to endorse a tax cut by means of increasing the standard deduction from \$600 to \$800 dollars? It was an extremely shrewd political move, and one that is calculated to increase his credibility. In other words, he is not using his credibility to get that amendment passed, but he is advocating the amendment in order to increase his credibility.

When we look at politicians, we may raise some ethical questions. Should the politician seek something that the audience likes and announce that he feels the same way. How about Hitler? The people of Germany were antagonistic towards Jews, so should have Hitler gone for the anti-Jewish position? Or in certain areas of the United States, should the wise politician take an anti-Negro position? In the politician we sometimes see this kind of behavior and it bothers us, but it is not only the politician who treats credibility as a thing to be achieved, rather than used. Businessmen, in fact whole business corporations, operate in this way. How many of you have seen programs on TV that have been sponsored by organizations such as US Steel or AT&T? Did you run right out and buy some steel? Or put an extra telephone in? Probably not. The pitch that these people are making is not to sell the product but to sell themselves, and this is in essence what any public relations firm's objective is! They are hired to enhance the credibility of the person or group who hires them--so the politician will hire them, the business corporation will hire them, the individual small businessman in many cases will hire them. Much of our advertising is not designed to sell products, it is designed to sell people and corporate entities.

In our interpersonal relations this also happens. I had an excellent example of it just this morning. I was taking a tour around campus and visiting various places. We went over to the computer center to find out what facilities were available. The young man who was there began by saying that he really did not know much about how to give a tour because he had not done that before. Then he proceeded to demonstrate that he knew a great deal about computers. After five minutes it must have been obvious to him that I did not understand what he was talking about. When he talked about input and output, I could follow; when he talked about an "algol inverter" I was lost. Well, he did not stop at that point; rather he went on 10 or 15 minutes more, giving me this detailed explanation of the Triangle computer and the local computer and the entire facility. He took me to a diagram that showed the whole thing. For that entire period all I was doing was saying "Yes," "Uh-huh," and shuffling a lot. But he was trying to make a point, the sort of thing that you and I do also, he kept demonstrating his competence in order to impress me. He succeeded. I am firmly convinced he knows what he is doing. He has high credibility with me. If I wanted to find out anything about that computer center, I would certainly go find that young man. And yet all that talking that he did was to one end: not to inform me about the computers--the first few minutes he may have done that--but after that he was trying to impress me with his knowledge about the system, and of course he was successful in that attempt.

Do we ever do anything similar? I think we all do, every day. When we sit down in the union building or the cafeteria with our friends, what do we talk about? Sometimes we are trying to influence them on issues, but normally it is just social conversation. And why do we bother to engage someone in social conversation? Why do you bother to say good morning to someone? If someone says good morning to you, why not tell them to go to blazes? We communicate to establish a good relationship with the other person. We naturally sense that credibility is important, even if we have never heard of the term. In fact, people who do not do this we call "deviants." We say they are victims of anti-social behavior patterns, and if they are bad enough we institutionalize them or give them therapy.

What is the impact of all of this in the total scheme of things? We have said that credibility is an important tool in public speaking and it is important as a target result of communication in order to achieve other ends. Very often in our society and in other societies throughout the world, there is an attempt to gain mass influence. We might ask, "How does this occur?" The research in mass communication, I think, clearly indicates that it does not occur primarily as a result of the mass media. People learn from the mass media, but the mass media does not appear to be a major force in causing them to change their attitudes. For example, if we wonder where people learn about major news events, the answer is simple. For the most part, the more important the news event, the more likely it is that people hear about it by TV or radio. The somewhat less important news event will be read about in the newspaper.³ If it is an event that is considered not newsworthy for the general public, we learn about it on a face-to-face basis. If Ginny fell down and broke her ankle yesterday, it probably will not be in the paper, but we will hear about it because Mary will tell us.

So the most important news and information come from the mass media. This would tend to suggest, of course, that the mass media is very influential on our attitudes and behavior. Research suggests just the opposite, that this input of information does not have much impact in itself. Rather the main thing that influences our attitudes and behaviors is interpersonal communication.

We tend to engage in interpersonal communication with people most like ourselves, and we tend to assimilate the attitudes of these people. Let us consider two terms for a moment: homophily and heterophily. These are actually opposite poles of one continuum. "Homophily" refers to the similarities between two people, "heterophily" to their differences. Maximum heterophily exists when two people in a communication situation are maximally different from one another on any given variable or group of variables. Maximum homophily exists when the two persons are almost identical on one variable or many variables. When we interact in our everyday lives, the persons that we seek to communicate with are those like us: we seek to establish a state of homophily and we tend to avoid heterophilous situations. If we know the person we have an opportunity to communicate with is different from us, we tend to avoid that transaction. Let us take a hypothetical example. Other things being equal, you walk into a room and there is one student and one professor there. Which are you going to talk to? Not very often are you going to

go to the professor unless you are trying to get a few extra points toward your grade. Normally you will talk to the student. If another professor walks in, who is he going to talk to? Probably the professor.

If I want to influence a mass of people out in society, I may choose to transmit my message on the mass media. Should I expect the majority of the people to accept my views? I should not. The very fact that I go on the mass media indicates something distinctive about me. People that are on the mass media are perceived as set apart from the rest of us--we do not tend to identify with them. We try to find people closer to us with whom we can identify. Thus the change agent (anyone working to produce change in a society) always has difficulty effecting change, because he is in this heterophilous state. The change agent is a professional or semi-professional, he is normally more educated than the people he is trying to influence, he usually is economically better off, and so forth. Let us take an example. We send an American to Latin America. He is an agricultural specialist. He wants to get the farmers there to start using fertilizer. He is well-educated; the peasant farmers are not well-educated. All his life he has seen the values of fertilizer. The farmers never heard of it before, at least in the form that the man is trying to push it. Now what is going to happen? The change agent probably is going to have minimum impact. Not because the audience does not see him to be credible in the sense of competent, but because they do not perceive him to be credible in terms of similarity. This seems to be an extremely important variable, this similarity variable. For years, this country has sent technicians to Latin America, and internally Washington has sent experts into the rural community--rural agricultural agents--in order to produce change. Changes often have been slow in coming.

Researchers have investigated this type of communication and determined that what is needed is somebody in between the change agent and the intended receiver--"opinion leader" is the term that has come to be used for this intermediary. We have to find the person to whom the receiver looks for advice, change that person's mind, and when we do, he in turn may change the intended receiver's mind. Take the members of a fraternity, for example. As outsiders we cannot expect to change many members' minds--they would tend to reject us. But if we communicate with the leader of the fraternity and alter his views, then he is apt to alter the other members' views.

Diffusion can be a multi-step process--it does not have to go through just one opinion leader, it can go through several. If, for example, you wanted to change my behavior in terms of plumbing repairs, you would have to, first of all, change the mind of my next-door neighbor, to whom I turn for all my advice on plumbing. I accept his view over that of a plumber (I figure the plumber has something to gain--my money). So if the plumber wants to change my mind, he had better talk to my neighbor. This is a concept that has many times been overlooked in massive communication programs. If we ask whom I would perceive to be most credible about plumbing, most people would pick the plumber because he is more competent. True, but it does not always follow that his is the opinion I actually will adhere to because the other variable, the similarity of interest, the character dimension if you will, is much more important in

many circumstances.

There has been some interesting research done on this in an area called "diffusion of innovations." This area represents the practical application of almost everything that we are teaching in the field of speech and communication. We are talking about how you go out and influence somebody and communicate your ideas. This area of research is looking at people who are actually trying to do just that. It is research that looks at how they get agricultural innovation in Latin America, how they get birth control adopted in India, or how we get a bond issue passed in Lansing, Michigan. It is research in a practical situation, and some of the things that have been discovered have been discovered almost by chance.

One of the most interesting of these is what I call the "Case of the Drooping Dhoti." In Pakistan they were going through an agricultural innovation program. This particular part of Pakistan has an extremely warm climate so the people there do not dress as we do. They wear a diaper-like garment called a dhoti that drapes around the waist. In this program the change agents went to each village, found out who was the leader of the village, and on each Tuesday afternoon they brought the leaders into the nearby city to the University and gave them special training. It was assumed that each leader would take back to his village what he had learned and pass it along to the rest of the community. This worked well for some time. They were having a magnificent impact in this part of Pakistan. These agricultural innovations were being made at an extremely rapid rate. All of a sudden, the program started to go down. Innovations were being adopted slower and slower and finally they just about stopped altogether. The people in the program did not understand why. So the first solution was to bring the village leaders in twice a week instead of once a week--and the results got worse. At this point the directors of the program invited a communication specialist from the U.S. to Pakistan to find out what was going wrong. He was there for some time before he discovered the cause of the problem. One day he was visiting in the class where they were working with these village leaders and he noticed that the village leaders' dhotis were extremely long. They hung way down below the knees. Afterwards he said, "I thought you told me that these village leaders actually were farmers themselves." They said, "That's true, they are farmers." He responded, "Well, why don't they look like farmers?" Farmers wear their dhotis up tight because when they are out in the fields if they are drooping they will get dirty. Only people in the cities wear drooping dhotis because there they will not get dirty. What had happened was this: the farmers who were the village leaders had developed real respect for the University people who were working with them. They tried to identify with the instructors and one of the things they did was adopt their style of wearing apparel--the drooping dhoti. So they wore their drooping dhotis back to the community, and what did the other farmers think? "Well, that's old George, he's putting on airs; he thinks he's big stuff going in there Tuesday afternoons". Instead of being nearly homophilous opinion leaders, the village leaders became very heterophilous with the other villagers and little influence was forthcoming.

This, of course, has much broader implications than merely getting

fertilizer adopted in Pakistan. Let me take, for instance, some cases in our society where we attempt influence across a rather wide gulf. Take the white teacher in a black ghetto school. Here we have an extremely heterophilous situation. The teacher and each student have backgrounds that are so unlike that they simply cannot understand the other person's background. How then can we bridge this kind of gap? In some areas they have adopted a program of teacher's aides. Especially in the black ghetto areas, they will employ black students in high schools or in colleges to come in on a part-time basis to work with the regular teacher. So the regular teacher communicates what he wants to the teacher aide and the teacher aide then tries to communicate it to the student. This often works exceptionally well, but in few places does it work long. Why do you think it does not work long? Something happens to that black student who is being used as a teacher aide. He does just exactly like those farmers in Pakistan. The thing that made him valuable to begin with was that he was nearly homophilous with the black elementary student. But who does he want to identify with? The student from the ghetto, or the white teacher? He starts identifying with the white teacher and all of a sudden he becomes a white teacher with a black skin. And what is the difference in his impact? Well, he has about the same impact that the white teacher would have--none or at least very little. He just washes out. In the programs that have been most successful what they have had to do is keep getting new teacher aides. The other alternative, of course, is to prevent the identification of a teacher aide with the regular teacher, to get him so that he understands that he is being pulled toward the teacher and resists it. Many do not want to resist it, figuring that the reason they are in the program is to learn to be teachers. It is a persistent problem.

What have I been saying here? In essence, this problem of credibility is so large that at one point when you overcome it, the fact that you overcome it presents another problem to be overcome. It is something against which we must be continually on guard in order to be able to cope with it. As students we have the problem. In your everyday lives with your peer group, you may not want to be looked upon as too bright, but when you walk into the college classroom there is absolutely no limit to your intelligence--you want to be perceived as maximally bright. This makes you serve two masters, and the harder you work and the brighter you get the more of your peer group you are going to find you have nothing in common with and the harder it is going to be to communicate with them--some of you may already see it when you go back home. Talk to the people with whom you went to high school. You have changed, you have moved on to identify with another society and when you do that you are divorcing yourself, even though you may not want to, from your original society--"You can't go home again". You cannot go home and be influential like you used to be. Sometimes it is a shock to a person when he goes back to his old group, particularly if he came from an area like I did where very few people go on to college. When I go home now I have absolutely nothing to talk to my former friends about. My attitudes are almost totally unlike theirs, my values are unlike theirs, what I believe is truth is unlike what they believe is truth, and about the only thing I can do is say "Let's go to the bar and get a beer" (we have that in common). At that point I have a little homophily but am not too good a communicator!

I will draw this all to a close by saying that I believe credibility is the central variable in all communication. It is there to be used and if you do not use it you probably are not going to be effective. At the same time it is there to be built because its existence will permit you to be effective. I leave you with a question to which I do not expect an answer: Given the communication environment we have just shared, what do you think my purpose was today?

NOTES

¹Frank Haiman, "An Experimental Study of the Effect of Ethos in Public Speaking," Speech Monographs, 16 (1949), 190-202.

²Judson Mills and Elliot Aronson, "Opinion Change as a Function of the Communicator's Attractiveness and Desire to Influence," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1 (1965), 173-177.

³P.J. Deutschmann and W.A. Danielson, "Diffusion of Knowledge of the Major News Story," Journalism Quarterly, 37 (1960), 345-355.

NOTICE

In the future all correspondence and business concerning
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