Communication and the Survival of Democracy

(Text of the Presidential Address delivered by Dr. Theodore Clevenger, Jr. to the annual convention of the Speech Communication Association, Palmer House, Chicago, Dec. 30, 1972).

As I think back over the year just past, I am tempted to spend these last few minutes with you reviewing the high points of a Presidential term that I shall never forget. But with the adoption of our first long-range goals, this convention represents a beginning, not an end, and so I shall forego the temptation to look back.

Instead, in the spirit of the ocasion, I offer you a swansong whose refrain is a challenge. It is a challenge, not for the seventies, but for the century. It is a challenge to commitment not *to* this Association, but *of* it; not to our parochial welfare, but to the well-being of this nation and, perhaps through her example, of western democracy.

I believe that the latent expertise of our profession has a special relevance to the needs of our time; that if we fail to meet those needs, someone else will have to do so in our place; and that if no one meets them, the days are numbered to the fall of democratic government.

Having heard this, perhaps some of you are ready to leave now and avoid the rush. This refrain is all too familiar, and you may feel that you have heard it all before. But before you reach for your overcoat, let me assure you that I am not going to repeat Chapter 1, Section 1 of the fundamentals textbook. I will not appeal for wider educational programs in debate, general semantics, group dynamics, parliamentary procedure, or the exercise of First Amendment freedoms. As important as these disciplines are, my proposal is more radical than that; for I shall ask you, not to do more and better what you are already doing, but to commit some of your time to something altogether different.

However, before we come to the proposal, let us examine the problem that gives rise to it.

I submit to you that western democracy stands today on the brink of disaster. Moreover, I submit that technological and social developments now in progress push us closer to that brink every day. I further submit that the problems brooding over our society today, lie just beyond the horizon for the less-well-developed nations, and that as they move into the communication revolution, identical problems will confront them in equal or greater degree.

On the surface, the pervasive symptom of our political failure is disharmony and dissent, a symptom which leads to many secondary complications. Now, I know that there are many who welcome dissent as the harbinger of needed social change; but even they admit that dissent is good, not in itself, but as an impetus to social reform.

Incidentally, this is why we see such a close correlation between political liberalism and the defense of dissent. People who praise dissent tend to feel that there is much in our society that needs changing. What throws one into confusion nowadays is the increasing amount of dissent arising to the right of political center, and in groups that refuse to ally with any established political philosophy. Once the private property of the political liberal, organized dissent is rapidly becoming a standard operating procedure for any group that perceives itself as outside the political mainstream; and as the mainstream dwindles to a trickle, the tactics of dissent emerge as a dominant political trend.

And I believe that the mainstream will continue to dwindle for several reasons. For one thing, the silent majority will, in due course, become a silent minority, because the commercial newscast is locked into a newsgathering and reporting format which rewards the tactics of dissent at the expense of other approaches to political action. Moreover, once a dissenting group passes a certain point in news coverage, it becomes material for the hour-long documentary and feature articles in the print media. This makes the group even more widely known, which renders it more newsworthy, leading to still more intensive news coverage. The cycle is inevitable, and it must be fueled with a constant supply of "events," the easiest of which to arrange are street actions, confrontations, and other tactics of dissent. Newsmen know this, and in their more candid moments, admit it, yet they are powerless to stop it.

But even if we could somehow interrupt this cycle, disharmony and dissent would continue to increase, and for a much more fundamental reason. The simple fact is that during the past fifteen years, the individual citizen has become increasingly aware of government. Because TV newscasts and specials nightly bring government leaders and programs into our living rooms, and because the wire services have greatly expanded the amount of background and analysis of those leaders and programs available in our morning papers, all of us today feel somehow closer to government than we did twenty years ago. With that growing awareness has come a false sense of familiarity; we are inclined to feel that anything we know that well should be subject in some degree to our influence. Yet we know that the media are strictly one-way; there is no readily available channel through which my individual, specific and detailed response can flow back into government.

Thus are planted the seeds of frustration. As the media pour upon us a steadily-expanding flow of information about our society, the urge grows upon us to participate more extensively in the decisions by which that society is molded and shaped. But the increased channel-capacity for input to the voter is not matched by capacity for feedback with late twentieth century inputs, today's citizen is trapped in a straight-jacket of eighteenth-century outputs.

And just what are the channels through which we may communicate to our society's decision-making centers? We may write letters to our representatives, but the influence here is both uncertain and indirect. At infrequent intervals, we may vote for candidates, but here our opportunities for self-expression and individual response are compressed to a single binary choice.

To illustrate the difficulties involved in that choice, consider your own U. S. Senator. Assuming that you know who he or she is, and what they stand for, ask yourself whether you agree with your Senator's stand on most issues. Ask further whether your senator has taken a stand on every issue that is important for you, or indeed whether he or she is aware of the existence of some of those issues. Finally, ask whether your Senator might not be forced to compromise a stand on some issues that are vital to you, in order to secure passage of legislation that stands higher on his or her priority ladder. Putting it all together, the sense in which you are "represented" by your Senator is almost metaphorical. And yet, next time at the polls you may find yourself forced to vote for that very Senator, because the other candidate would represent you even more poorly.

This agonizing choice between poor representation and worse representation has driven many voters into a state of despair. Some have dropped out of the political process altogether, others have joined protest groups. But many of the latter experience a rude awakening when they discover that the protest movement itself is as thoroughly bureaucratized as the society it was organized to protest. Structured to bring leverage against the establishment, it becomes, almost of necessity, a mirror image of the establishment with many of the structural details carried over intact. It is probably at least as hard for a rank-and-file citizen to influence the peace movement as it is to influence the Pentagon. Both bureaucracies and anti-bureaucracies resist the influence of individuals.

Not only is this situation demoralizing, but it represents an increasingly flagrant violation of *the* fundamental assumption of democratic government—the assumption that truth and wisdom will triumph in a free marketplace of ideas. The truth is that the marketplace for ideas in this country today is anything but free. We have not so much an intellectual free trade as an interlocking network of monopolies and cartels.

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The development of media has in effect conferred our collective intellectual proxy on a relative handful of opinion leaders, and a massive gatekeeping privilege on another handful of communication managers. These are the new Robber Barons of the Seventies, accumulating power not through wealth but through access to communication channels. And the incomparably richer flux of information to which we are not exposed in no way compensates for the disparity between their transmission power and our own. Knowledge should be power, but for the average citizen today, knowledge only sharpens awareness of our individual political impotence.

It is that awareness of individual helplessness which lies at the core of our problem. What we confront is nothing less than the impending breakdown of representative government. Sometime before the year 2000, it will have become technologically obsolete. By that date, I predict that certain provisions of our Federal Constitution will have been rewritten, or else the Constitution *and the Republic will have passed into* history. During the last quarter of this century, we will move inexorably toward either dictatorship or participatory democracy.

Let's assume for purposes of argument that you agree with me that the latter represents the more palatable alternative. It is, in the view of many, the governmental ideal upon which western democracy was formed.

(I trust that you will forgive me if I refuse to talk seriously with an ultra-Madisonian viewpoint that enjoys a certain popularity in academic circles today the argument that representative government is preferable to participatory democracy because it somehow invests the wisest and best qualified people with decision-making power. If I believed that the majority of citizens were unqualified to participate directly in democratic decision-making, I would also have to conclude that they lacked the good sense to elect qualified representatives. No, the Madisonian viewpoint is undisguised elitism, and I think it should be dismissed as inappropriate to the Twentieth Century.)

I think the only reasonable position is that recourse to elected representatives is necessary because it has always been impractical to give every citizen an active voice *in the real decision-making processes* of the country. After all, the difficulties of transporting a hundred million voters to a single locale for democratic decision making are insuperable; even if you could somehow overcome that problem, they could never all meet face-to-face; and even if they could, the ensuing debate would no doubt last for the estimated duration of the universe. Limits of time and space dictated a compromise: if a citizen cannot participate in the debate, then let him vote for a representative to debate for him.

Note that this compromise rests on a practicality strictly determined by limits of time and space. But the technology of 1972 has reduced the natural limits of time and space by several orders of magnitude, particularly where messages are concerned. Great masses of information can be sorted, analyzed and stored in less time than your Senator spends on a coffee break. It can be retrieved, duplicated, processed and transmitted thousands of miles while he is asking for the floor. The hardware is now available to vitiate the compromise which eighteenth-century technology forced on democratic governments.

If appropriate software can be developed soon enough, we shall be able to overcome the limits of time and space which deprive the individual citizen of the opportunity to participate directly in societal decisions. That citizen will then be able to help decide what we shall do, not merely who will decide what we shall do.

The hardware is already with us in the form of two-way interactive cable television augmented by electronic data storage and time-sharing computers. Computers we have *in abundance*. The interactive cable systems are now under test in a sample of businesses and private homes in Washington, Orlando and several other major markets, where subscribers are using response systems attached to their TV sets to register opinions, buy products, and request information. It is estimated that by 1980, nearly 90% of all homes will be equipped with cable TV, many of these with some interactive capability. Assuming that cable lives up to its commercial promise, most U.S. homes will have interactive systems within twenty years.

It is comforting to hope that when that day comes, the groundwork will have been laid to allow us to incorporate this new technology into an enriched democratic process. I cannot emphasize too strongly that hardware will not be enough. Unless we begin now to investigate its potential for the democratic process, the hardware may only contribute to the problem, not its solution.

Let us then examine what a solution to this problem might look like.

The simplest solution, and the least satisfactory, would use multiple-choice feedback in a sort of electronic public opinion poll, *with the results counting as a referendum.* Such an approach has the merit of directness and technological simplicity, and the hardware to implement it is cheap and available. However, it limits the voter to a narrow choice on issues defined and predigested by someone else. If the interactive capability never goes beyond this level, it cannot deal with an issue in depth, nor will it provide the voter with a fully-satisfactory spectrum of input to the democratic process.

A more complicated solution, and a better one, would allow the voter to use a teletypewriter to input problem definitions, request information on specific points of contention, and recommend courses of action. From the engineering point of view, such a system could be implemented in perhaps a decade or so, especially if one did not insist on a console in every home. An alternative would be neighborhood political centers where several consoles could be served by a single cable installation. The feedback channel for each response console would require much less bandwidth than a single telephone line, thus with multiplexing equipment now available, the feedback needs of an entire neighborhood could be served by the electronic equivalent of a single twisted pair. Moreover, such an arrangement might have other advantages as well. With proper attention to the architecture and administration of such a center, it could serve as a focus for both formal and informal political dialog. Given immediate access to information in the center, such dialog could be much more informed, meaningful and productive than is most political discussion today. For example, points of controversy over matters of fact could be settled by recourse to the computer's data file.

To carry the process a step further, such a system should be interfaced with the mass media. At present, TV documentaries and in-depth press analyses are dictated by what newsmen think it important for us to know. Unquestionably, newsmen should retain the right to print or broadcast whatever they choose; but with a system of the type we are discussing, it would be possible also to monitor information requests and thus determine what significant groups of voters wanted to know. Alternative channels, like those now being set aside as public access channels on TV, could then be created for the broadcast of documentaries and publication of analyses tailor-made to voter needs.

Clearly, whatever hardware problems may be involved in designing such a system are dwarfed by the problems we encounter in software and philosophy of operation.

At the very least, software for this kind of system will involve information-retrieval techniques far beyond anything envisioned by either library scientists or industrial decision-makers. First of all, there are tough problems of semantic indexing to be worked out. Perhaps paramount among these is the *still-unsolved problem of shifting categories.* Everyone who has tried to work with information retrieval in a growing field has discovered that today's categories will not serve tomorrow's information needs. Certainly the shifting sands of political dialog represent the ultimate challenge in information storage and retrieval.

Problems of semantic indexing shade by imperceptible degrees into problems in the theory of argument and evidence. As a crude example, if I ask for information about a guaranteed annual wage, the information I get will depend upon what argu-

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ments are identified as relevant to the G.A.W., and what information is held to be relevant to each of those arguments. The question of how to identify relevant arguments and relevant evidence– that is, how to identify it unequivocally and algorithmically,—has never been answered. Ask yourself how you would program a computer to recognize either of these crucial components of policy debate, and you can see how much we still have to learn about applied argumentation.

In a still more sophisticated version of our system, an advanced and explicit theory of argument would be even more important. Suppose that analysis of voter interests and information-seeking behavior should reveal that few voters are interested in every aspect of any policy question, but that most of them tend to specialize their interest on some aspect or other. In that case, it is possible for the voter to cast a ballot not only on the policy question as a whole, but on the acceptability of various contentions supporting it. Thus, one might vote not just on whether or not to adopt a guaranteed annual wage, but on such matters as the level of support, the groups that should receive it, whether the need for such a program were convincingly demonstrated, whether certain advantages or disadvantages would accrue, and whether the values served or threatened by the program were important or unimportant. Given a valid, in-depth analysis of the question, plus accumulated voter opinions on individual arguments and evidence, an automatic decision paradigm might be written. This would allow a decision to be made automatically and rationally from voter input on the issues.

Of course, this paradigm would represent the heart of a sweeping constitutional revision. But more to the point for us, the paradigm cannot be written without much fuller development of the theory of rational decision-making on general policy questions.

Once the basic theoretical work were done, it would be possible to develop a variety of refinements in application. For example, the system could be structured so as to interact with the voter in a simulated debate, giving him an opportunity to confront arguments both supporting and contrary to his point of view. It would even be possible to set up voting "gates" such that the voter would be required to proceed through a certain amount of information and argument before casting a ballot.

Here, of course, we move from the theory of argument to the philosophy of self-government; do we have the right to insist that a citizen go through a semblance of rational thought before casting a vote? And if we have such a right, what limits should be set to our exercise of it?

I suggest to you that the spectrum of problems posed by the development of such a democratic decision-making system, provides grist for the mill of virtually every specialty represented in this Association. There are problems here for the empiricist and the philosopher; for the rhetorician and the communication theorist; for the humanist as well as the social scientist. The challenge encompasses linguistics and speech science, general semantics, interpersonal and group communication, argument, rhetoric, mass communication and general systems theory. It is not the sort of problem that is likely to be solved by RAND or HEW; it will require the committed interest of many scholars, thinkers and researchers working in different fields toward a common goal – the creation of a system whereby the individual citizen can participate directly in the affairs of government, and can make an unfiltered, undiluted, uncompromised personal contribution to the key decisions affecting our society.

As you order your personal and our corporate priorities for research and development over the years ahead, I ask only that some of you bear in mind what I have said here today. I believe that our society faces no greater challenge than the need to bring democratic machinery into line with the demands of the Twenty-First Century. As we approach the year 2000, signs are growing that unless we can radically change course, we may be faced with a choice between autocracy and chaos. That is a choice over which mankind has never had much trouble making up its mind.

I believe that you hold the power to create a third alternative – a system for converting our increasingly unsatisfactory system of representative government into a full-scale participatory democracy. I invite you to exercise that power, and thereby to set the stage for a quantum jump in man's struggle toward freedom and self-realization.

Manuscripts Sought

An invitation is extended to teachers and other educators at elementary, secondary, and college-university levels to share ideas on *growth through language development* in the coming issue of *Classroom Practices in Teaching English*, an annual publication of the National Council of Teachers of English. Articles might relate to reading, writing, speaking, listening, communication, increasing student and teacher awareness of themselves and others – anything which fosters growth through language development. Articles can range in length up to 2,000 words. Two copies should be mailed before April 15 to Allen Berger, Co-Editor, *Classroom Practices in Teaching English*, The University of Alberta, Education Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

German-American Speech Colloquium Held

Twenty-four delegates from the Speech Communication Association and the German Speech Society met at the Albertus Magnus Akademie in Walberberg (Cologne) Germany for the Third Biannual German-American Communication Colloquium June 23 through 25, 1972. Co-Chairmen for the colloquium were Drs. Klaus Pawlowski of Gottingen University and Ken E. Hadwiger of Eastern Illinois University.

American professors presenting formal papers included Drs. William Franklin of North Carolina State at Raleigh, Larry Wilder of the University of Wisconsin, Thomas Nilsen of the University of Washington (Seattle), Calvin N. Smith of Eastern Illinois University and Dennis Bormann of the University of Nebraska who also served as a German-English translator.

Honorary one-year SCA memberships were awarded to four Germans in recognition of their exceptional communication scholarship. The four were: Dr. Klaus Pawlowski of Gottingen University, Dr. Hellmut Geissner of the University of Saarbrucken, Dr. Ilse Schweinsberg-Reichart of the Hans Bockler Schule, and Dr. Lothar Berger of the University of Marburg.

The next German-American Communications Colloquium will be held during the week of July 20, 1974. The program for the Colloquium will be determined in part by the training and interests of persons who are chosen to represent the SCA and the German Association. Knowledge of the German language is not mandatory. Successful planning of this international venture relies upon early preparation. Persons interested in being considered as 1974 delegates from the Speech Communication should direct their inquiries to: Ken Hadwiger, Department of Speech Communication, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, Illinois 61920.

The *Proceedings* for the 1972 Colloquium will be available to SCA members after January, 1973. Requests for copies should be sent to Hadwiger.

SCA/AOTE

The Associated Organizations for Teacher Education (AOTE) is a consortium of some eighteen national societies whose members have substantial interests in the preparation of teachers. Through action of the Administrative Committee, SCA has become an affiliate organization of the AOTE. Among the AOTE constituent organizations are: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Association for Educational Communication and Technology, International Reading Association, National Council of Teachers of English, and the Society of Professors of Education.