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### The Listening Skills and Their Influence on Public Speaking Style in the Age of Mass Media

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**Abstract:** The change in communication technology in the last several decades has changed the form, the content and the style of public speaking. It means that the skills like critical thinking, audience analysis, preparation and organization are not sufficient enough to reach the modern audiences. The substantial reason is that the mass media has a major influence on public and personal opinion and speaking skills. James Chesebro says that “media exert an independent and profound influence upon the nature of reality apprehended by human beings and that speechmaking, like reading and writing generates predominantly analytical, logical, sequential, and scientific modes of understanding , while electronic media generate predominantly synthesizing, holistic pattern-recognition and aesthetic modes”[1]. The model of thinking of a modern man is greatly shaped by mass media. The analysis of listening skills and its importance in creation a good speak making in the world of media dominance will be the major focus of this paper.

**Key words:** style, public speaking, listening skills, information age

In the postmodern world, the world of information, the majority of people turned to mass media, particularly TV, radio and newspaper in search for truth. It is certain that media formulate the shared reality in every-day life reserving for themselves the right on truth. There is the generally imposed idea in the world that there is no truth outside media. And we agree that the human basic need is the search for truth, opposed to just taking the orders by any form of “big brother’s” control. As a way of refreshing our minds, we cannot forget that the technology of media has come from the military technology and the purpose of that technology was spying and controlling.

The postmodern individual is overloaded with the messages that have stopped being meaningful and important for his or her well-being. He/she has been blindfolded for many decades with information that has mainly commercial and consumer-stimulating meaning. Their world has become the world of virtual reality. Several theorists of modern media even talk about the media as the extension of human perception where virtual reality areas contain the past and future as its features of setting, and recognize only the present time.

The major question in the postmodern era should be the serious question of the development of people’s prosperity, dignity and security. The new technology represents some kind of technical utopia. Is it the intention to bring freedom in people’s every day life or oppose oppression as the main concern of present-day philosophers? Their argument is

that the media use people who passively put up with the silent aggression to their intimate, personal and social lives. One of the leading postmodern philosophers in the field of philosophy of media is the Serbian professor and philosopher Divna Vuksanovic. Her basic concept is that the people of the modern era have to “think media”. The role of the philosophers in the information age should be to strictly distinguish between the dialog and the one way information flow. Also, they should constantly search for truth and meaning in human life. The research in the field of aesthetics and ethics of media and the new technologies yet has to come. The role and the meaning of culture and art bear particular importance to us, as well as, the role of public speaking and the significance of written and spoken language at this time.

Is media culture authentic or not? Is the culture in the traditional sense of the word in continuity or not? She gives a good example of different experiences while watching alive theater performance and the filmed one. The artistic joy loses its power through the camera eye. She also talks about the *ram boy theory* that will come at the end of media culture when each person should be able to present himself or herself in the complete light, in the spectra of reemploy colors. She is afraid, when that time comes, everybody will be like egg to egg. Not to be out of grad when that time comes, she suggests that it is not enough to passively and intuitively criticize, but, also to get armed with the knowledge and critical thinking to be able to actively create our own future. And the final question will be: is there still space and good will for the public opinion to adapt to a new situation where everybody speaks and no one listens?

#### *PUBLIC SPEAKING AND FLASHY VALUES*

To be able to watch one's own personal growth as a public speaker is partly based on personal analyses. Let's for the beginning start with the analysis of one typical day in a day of a potential public speaker. The day starts with coffee and Good morning America, Serbia, Bulgaria on TV or, radio or newspaper. The news are mainly bad news, or better, negative ones, such as Spanish pink series, health reports on organic food and prevention, the weather forecast, football, tennis, talk shows, political shows, comedy shows, face book shares and comments, Skype chats, mails, telephone written and oral messages and... Such, abnormal in number, messages during the busy day, that have been designed for listeners and viewers with limited attention spans, affect greatly the quality of listening of a listener, as well as the effort of a public speaker. Programs are mainly made up of flashy values to capture viewer's attention without much effort to be listened to carefully and thoroughly.

Information-loaded messages that are designed by high professionals confuse their audience of potential customers (listeners, viewers, readers) about what to retain and what to let go.

However, the truth is that the messages are designed to encourage passive, uncritical listening. Here is, actually, the main problem the present day public speaker is facing because both parts, the speakers and the public, are not equipped with critical listening.

In our further analysis we will focus on the listening skills of the audience, in order to be able to conclude the main thesis that these skills substantially affect the public speaking style. The need for precise and effective public speaking will for certain come to anyone in

his or her life time. There are some similarities between the public speaking, every day conversation and media communication. On the other hand, there are specifics that are related only to public speaking. There are three main goals of public speaking: to inform, to persuade and to entertain. It has been like that from the agora of Ancient Greece and the first books of Rhetoric. Public speaking has its own rules. It is highly structured, requires more formal language than everyday conversation, and different method of delivery. Public speakers, in the first place, have to develop skills in critical thinking that can help in spotting the weaknesses in media reasoning. Media tell their audience what is beautiful, what the important social and political issues are, who is right and who is ranging their aggressive manner: media has affected all aspects of human life and, in particular, which is our main concern in this paper, it has affected public speaking as well.

In our capacity as audience of mass media, it is easy to fake and improvise our listening capacities. Jokes, light shows, movies, news are of that kind of content that doesn't motivate listeners to listen carefully. Every school of public speaking agrees that to be able to become a good speaker it is necessary to be able to be a good listener. There are several reasons for it. In the first place, the ability to listen carefully and critically helps the improvement of the speaker's own quality of speaking.

The most serious effect that media has produced, is a credibility problem for speakers. Compared to the credibility of speakers in Ancient Greece or Medieval Europe, or even in the time before the information age, today's public speaker meets with much stronger mistrust and skepticism. The media do not control the amount of messages, which are very often contradictory and confusing. Also it is very difficult for the (specialized and local) media (but the main reason is the lack of interest) to summarize the mass of information and adapt it to individual needs. The main weight goes to the shoulders of the public speaker who has to fight the odds of being less interesting than the products of the entertainment industry. This form of communication seems much boring in comparison to media entertainment... Proper language in comparison to screaming and squeaking that occur on today's talk and reality shows, news announcement, commercial bravadoes, for many is dull.

The truth is, and many theorists and authors of books and articles on public speaking agree with it, that today in the information age public speaking is more important than ever before. Gorge Rodman and Ronald Adler, are among many who stress that "through public speaking we achieve something impossible to do through the media: we make human contact with an organized message, while taking advantage of face-to-face communication. We do this, as often as not, to help our audience make sense of some segments of the information glut." [2]

It is very important to know that there is a major misconception that speaking and communication are the same process. Sometimes it does happen when there is the true understanding and true listening. "You can speak to listener, but if the listener does not understand your message in the way you meant it to be understood, you have failed to communicate it" [3]. That strongly indicates that speaking and communicating are not synonymous. If the listener interprets the message incorrectly because of the lack of understanding or listening, he or she sends feedback to the speaker that is negative. A

sensitive and devoted speaker can feel and sense that. That means that communication hasn't taken place. "Communication is not simply sending a message. It is creating true understanding – swiftly, clearly and precisely," says a Japanese slogan.

Opposite to the media of one sided communication where the main goal is through repetitions to somehow drug the listener and sell the product, the Internet can support two-direction communication, but this is to be set for discussion in a further paper.

Opposite to that approach the public speaker as the originator of a message has the responsibility to transmit the message to a listener. The question that the public speaker is asking is not the question that the media in general is asking: *Am I giving good information and perform well?* His question should be like: *Am I getting through to my listeners?* Only when there is the engagement of the listener's heart and mind it means that he has received a worthwhile message and he has received and interpreted the message correctly, and the communication hasn't failed to take place. The only way to understand the message is to listen carefully. The speaker has to listen carefully also to be able to interpret the feedback from the listener. Sometimes this ability to listen to the feedback is more important than the eloquence and the dynamism of the speaker's delivery for the correct communication to take place. Both sides, the speaker and the listener should try hard to listen to each other. Every speaker deserves a fair hearing, and each listener deserves a full speaker's respect. Andrew Grove, former CEO of Intel Corporation said: "How well we communicate is determined not by how well we say things but how well we are understood". But we are not listening only with our ears; we are listening with our eyes and hearts because of the symbolic meanings of words and non verbal gestures. By facial mimics and expressions, gestures, pose, both sides in the communication process will be able to better understand the eagerness of both sides to communicate and completely understand each other.

Careful listening on both sides is very important because the listeners receive messages in the form of symbols. If the tone of voice of the speaker is regretful and their face has mournful expression, the listener will not hear well and accept the speaker's words.

The listener will read the non verbal signs and will not accept the words. The non verbal part should always reinforce the verbal part.

#### *THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION PROCESS*

The process of communication is very complex and requires a certain model [4].



hear, rather than listen for new content can create a “black hole” in the listening process. There is, also, a big problem of prejudicial judgments based on cultural stereotyping and personal biases that lead to defensive listening. Carl Rogers wisely said that most people are afraid to listen because what they hear might make them change. Cultural and political bias usually affect listening in the way that, in our culture, talking is associated with intellect, leadership and power while listening as passive and inferior position. These two authors suggest that, actually the opposite is the reality. According to them the most intelligent and powerful leaders are usually the best listeners.

Listening is an active process that requires effort. George Rodman and Ronald Adler, recommend five methods that help in improving listening skills: being prepared, controlling distractions, withholding judgment, taking notes and taking advantage of the thought – speech differential [5].

The listening ability can be improved by building up a positive attitude about listening and making a conscious effort to overcome distractions. The premature evaluation of a speech can also affect the listening abilities. The topics shouldn't be dismissed as “not interesting” until the speaker finishes his or her speech. And what is even more important is to keep the criticism of the speaker apart from the criticism of the speech. The feelings about the speaker can greatly interfere with the comprehension of the message. For that reason every speaker should be respected, at least, as a source of information. Note taking prevents listening to insignificant details that distract the listener from the main points of the speech. Note taking helps in balancing speaking and thinking speeds. Constructive criticism should be nonjudgmental. It means that critical statements cannot provoke a defensive response.

We can conclude the discussion on listening skills with the famous words of Oliver Wendell Holmes: “It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen”. The age of information has brought many positive effects. However, people have become less patient and concentrated when listening. That is the reason why a much stronger effort should be made while listening to what people have to say about important issues. If we understand the importance of working on these skills, the style of public speaking will be improved and the content of speech will be better understood.

#### *SUMMARY*

The information age is the age where the listening skill is slowly disappearing from the scene of communication. The media's intention is to keep the short attention span and produce so many messages that no one can memorize. Public speaking in the age of mass media has an even bigger role than in the past. To be able to create an original speaking style in this specific time it is important to work hard on improving the listening skills of listeners and public speakers. This paper has discussed some of the reasons for such an important necessity, and some of methods of how to do it.

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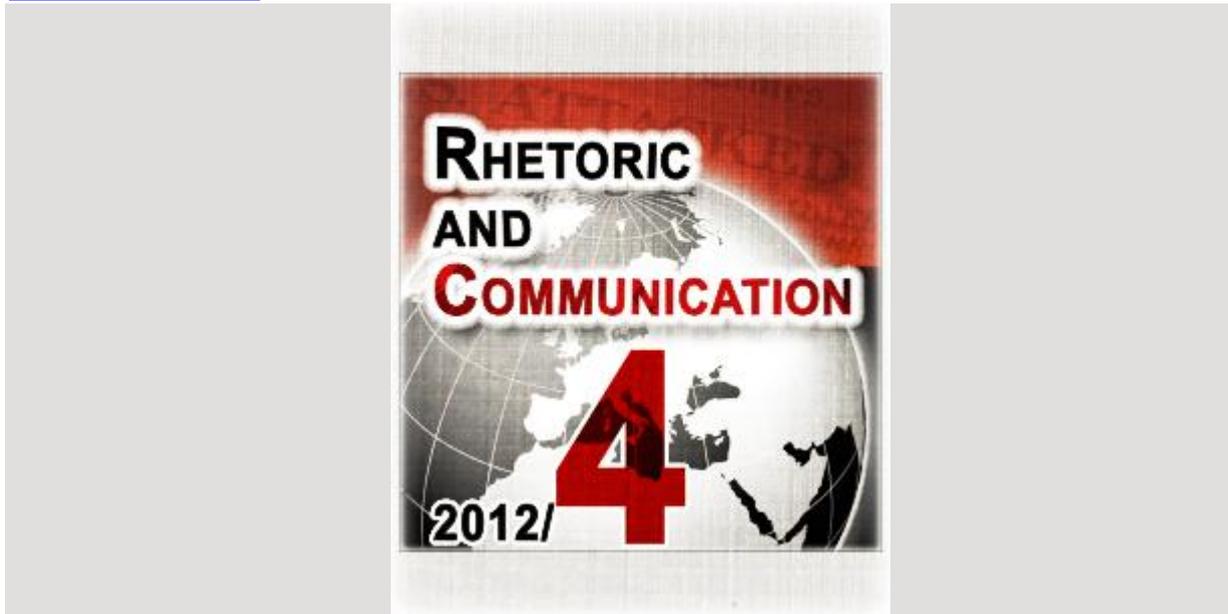
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<http://rhetoric.bg/the-listening-skills-and-its-influence-on-public-speaking-style-in-the-age-of-mass-media>



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