

## Blood and Gore on the Information Campaign Trail

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Many Extension professionals look to public service information campaigns as a major method of message dissemination. This author says that discouraging results may occur through the heavy reliance on public service campaigns for changing knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of the intended audience. He provides evidence to show that a variety of channels are more useful than public service mass media alone for effecting behavioral change.

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Literature on information-campaigns reveals that: (1) relatively few information campaigns have been evaluated and (2) when systematic tests of the effectiveness of information campaigns have been run, the results have been discouraging to the campaigners.<sup>1</sup>

For example, the principal conclusion about traffic safety campaigns is that no one knows whether they had any effect or not. Haskins cites the "Buckle Up for Safety" and "Watch Out for the Other Guy" campaigns as examples of inconclusive campaigns. As of October 1966, an estimated \$40 million in advertising space and unknown amount of creative and administrative effort has been devoted to that campaign. Yet, according to

published reports, no systematic research on the effects of it has been done and no one will ever know its effects, if any.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, failure characterizes many information campaigns that have been evaluated. For example, a massive campaign to bombard Cincinnati with information about the United Nations produced no increase in the level of citizen knowledge, according to a survey by the National Opinion Research Center.<sup>3</sup>

In a national effort to produce a change in public understanding of the function of war bonds in the wartime economy, an expensive two-year campaign using all media produced no change in the public's knowledge that war bonds were intended to

curb inflation, and not to "raise money for the war."<sup>4</sup>

A week-long intensive effort to change attitudes toward the use of oil (vs. gas) in the home produced a 13 percent conversion from pro-gas to pro-oil sentiment—but a 9 percent "boomerang" (from pro-oil to pro-gas).<sup>5</sup>

An Extension information campaign in Virginia on pesticide use, using television and radio spots, newspapers, and an Extension publication was "not effective in producing the desired change in the urban audience."<sup>6</sup>

In Illinois, an Extension information campaign on consumer education, using television and radio spots and newspaper ads also failed.<sup>7</sup>

The magazine *Advertising Age* stated that The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety released the results of a nine-month test which concluded that even prize-winning TV spots urging the use of safety belts "had no effects whatsoever."<sup>8</sup>

#### **Successes Are Few and Far Between**

Relatively few mass media information campaigns have met with a high degree of success. The most widely cited instance of success in persuasion through the mass media was Kate Smith's marathon talk over the radio that sold millions of dollars worth

of war bonds during the Second World War.<sup>9</sup>

Analyses of Kate Smith's success credit the marathon nature of her speech, the cause (patriotism) she espoused, and the psychological as well as physical monopolization of the medium that she had. Today's campaigners don't normally have the advantages Kate Smith had.

Other successful campaigners include Douglas, Westley, and Chaffee, who were able to change community attitudes toward mental retardation,<sup>10</sup> and Salcedo, and others, who were able to increase audience knowledge and strengthen attitudes toward pesticide safety and the pesticide label.<sup>11</sup>

Sarbaugh reports that more farmers in a target community tested soil during the month following a soil testing program than during any previous month.<sup>12</sup>

These sporadic successes in mass persuasion are a far cry from the early notions of the "all-powerful" media.

At a general level, many reasons have been presented to explain why information campaigns fail. Typically, these explanations invoke audience-bound factors such as personality traits and the selectivity processes (selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention) as they influence the communication behavior of individuals. Other explanations cite the nature of

mass media and interpersonal communication channels, usually in terms of what each channel can or cannot do.<sup>13</sup>

Another explanation usually given is that information alone doesn't necessarily change attitudes in a predictable direction. Douglas states that knowledge and attitudes should be highly correlated for topics where "informed people are unlikely to differ."<sup>14</sup> Other authors stress the importance of certain cues in the message to "motivate" the audience.<sup>15</sup>

### The Study

This article presents an alternative explanation to information campaigns that failed. It focuses on a fundamental principle in communication: *the message must reach the intended audience before any "campaign effects" can be expected.* This principle seems obvious, according to Cartwright, but readership studies show that this prerequisite isn't always met, even after the "message" has been printed or broadcast.<sup>16</sup>

Specifically, this article discusses the disadvantages of the public service approach to information campaigns, using the results of four campaigns in Extension to illustrate the points.

The Cooperative Extension Service conducts many information campaigns through the mass media to reach a large segment of

the out-of-school audience. For example, these campaigns may encourage wider participation in urban 4-H activities, milk testing and record keeping for herd improvement among dairy farmers, soil conservation and tillage, or farm safety.

However, evaluation of many information campaigns in Extension are either nonexistent or inconclusive. *First*, many Extension information campaigns aren't evaluated.

Second, some communicators evaluate their campaigns by merely reporting how many times their campaign materials were used by the mass media and converting this free time into dollar equivalents. This practice seems to imply that the more money spent on the campaign, the more successful the campaign.

Third, many campaign evaluations fail to include a "control" group, so, we don't know what could have happened if the information campaign hadn't been conducted at all.

The studies to be presented here were originally reported by Gruenhagen;<sup>17</sup> Douglas and others;<sup>18</sup> Salcedo and others;<sup>19</sup> and Salcedo, Scherer, and Alison.<sup>20</sup> These studies were selected because:

1. Each campaign was evaluated in terms of changes (knowledge, attitudes, or behavioral intentions) in the intended audience.

2. Each evaluation used pre-test and post-test data from experimental and control groups.
3. In varying degrees, each campaign used public service outlets to disseminate messages.
4. Two of these campaigns represent successful efforts, the other two failures, and
5. The studies represent a fairly wide range of campaign topics.

Table 1 summarizes the 4 campaigns in terms of topic, channels used, intended audience, and their results. None of the studies measured behavior change, partly due to methodological considerations. Gruenhagen and Salcedo (1972, 1973) measured message exposure by asking the respondents if they had heard, read, and/or seen the campaign message in the media. If the respondents said "yes," they were asked to state the message (message recall). Then, Salcedo and others (1972, 1973) asked the respondents how they used or intended to use the message in the information campaign (behavioral intention).

The following related points are evident from Table 1: (1) successful campaigns used *more* channels of communication than the campaigns that failed, (2) successful campaigns used *both* mass and interpersonal channels to disseminate their messages, while

the campaigns that failed relied *purely* on the mass media, and (3) the campaigns that relied heavily on public service outlets to disseminate their messages failed.

### Public Service Approach

It's the thesis here that the public service approach to information campaigns, when used alone, isn't adequate.

In its classic form, the public service campaigner produces his message and sends the message (tapes, films, newspaper ads, etc.) to the media. In a separate letter, he may describe the contents, the target audience, and the purpose of the message. The media people are supposed to do the rest.

Therefore, a typical public service campaign depends on the willingness of the individual radio announcer or public service director to disseminate the message when he wants to or when he finds the time. Thus, if they're aired at all, many public service announcements are aired at a time when very few of the intended audience are tuned in.

Table 2 presents the number of times the public service messages were disseminated in the 4 campaigns. Gruenhagen reported that the use of his messages by the mass media (radio, television, and newspaper) in the treatment community during his campaign was "inadequate." Even the time

Table 1. Summary table comparing four information campaigns in Extension.

| Category                | Gruenhagen (1969)  | Douglas, Westley, and Chaffee (1970)  | Salcedo and others (1972)   | Salcedo and others (1973)   |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| A. Topic                | Pesticide use  | Mental retardation  | Pesticide safety  | Consumer education  |
| B. Channels used        | Television spots<br>Television programs<br>Radio spots<br>Newspaper articles<br>Extension publications (pamphlets) | News stories<br>Feature stories<br>Newspaper ads<br>Radio spots<br>Posters, exhibits<br>Church meetings<br>Meetings with 4-H Clubs<br>Announcements by Junior Chamber of Commerce | Newspaper articles<br>Newspaper ads<br>Radio spots<br>Television spots<br>Direct mail pieces sent to all households<br>Announcement by Safety Council<br>Discussion groups with Extension adviser | Radio spots<br>Television spots<br>Newspaper ads<br>Slide sets          |
| C. Campaign duration    | 1 month  | 6 months  | 1 month   | 2 months  |
| D. Intended audience    | Adults in Richmond, Virginia   | Adults in Reedsburg, Wisconsin  | Adults in Quincy, Illinois  | Low-income homemakers in Peoria and Springfield, Illinois               |
| E. Campaign evaluation  |  |   |   |   |
| 1. Total sample size    | 1,611 adults   | 145 adults  | 1,064 adults  | 1,334 low-income homemakers   |
| 2. Message exposure     | 24%*   | Not reported  | 24%†  | 23% (Springfield)*<br>30% (Peoria)‡<br>2% (Springfield)<br>11% (Peoria) |
| 3. Message recall       | Not reported   | Not reported  | 54%   | None (contaminated)   |
| 4. Knowledge change     | Boomerang  | Yes   | Yes   | None  |
| 5. Attitude change      | None   | Yes   | Yes   | None  |
| 6. Behavioral intention | Not measured   | Not measured  | Yes   | None  |
| 7. Conclusion           | Campaign failed  | Campaign succeeded  | Campaign succeeded  | Campaign failed   |

\* Of this number, TV was reported by 74%; radio, 17%; newspaper, 9%; and the publication, 19%; as sources of exposure.

† Of this number, radio was reported by 39%; mail piece, 39%; TV, 36%; newspaper, 22%; and friends, 4%; as sources of exposure.

‡ Of this number, TV was reported by 37%; friends, 31%; radio, 27%; newspaper, 20%; as sources of exposure.

§ Of this number, newspaper was reported by 38%; TV, 33%; friends, 26%; and radio, 22%; as sources of exposure.

|| Based on the number of those who claimed they read/saw/heard the campaign message.

Table 2. Summary table comparing frequency of dissemination of public service messages by the mass media in four information campaigns.

| Medium                                | Gruenhagen (1969)            | Douglas, Westley, and Chaffee (1970)   | Salcedo and others (1972)            | Salcedo and others (1973)           |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>A. Television Spots</b>            |                              |  |                                      |                                     |
| 1. No. given to each station          | 10 spots<br>7 programs       | Didn't use   | 4 spots                              | 3 spots                             |
| 2. Frequency of broadcast (all spots) | "Inadequate"<br>1 spot a day | Not applicable   | 3 times a day for 1 month            | Less than 1 spot a day for 2 months |
| 3. Time of day aired                  | 5:00 a.m.—7:00 a.m.          | Not applicable   | "Some prime time"                    | Not ascertained                     |
| <b>B. Radio Spots</b>                 |                              |  |                                      |                                     |
| 1. No. given to each station          | 4 spots                      | Not reported   | 4 spots                              | 3 spots                             |
| 2. Frequency of broadcast (all spots) | Not reported                 | "Number of times"  | A total of 5 times a day for 1 month | 5 times a day for 2 months          |
| 3. Time of day aired                  | 6:00 a.m.—6:45 a.m.          | Not reported   | Not ascertained                      | Not ascertained                     |
| <b>C. Newspaper article/ads</b>       |                              |  |                                      |                                     |
| 1. No. written for each paper         | 4 stories                    | Not reported   | 5 ads                                | 3 ads                               |
| 2. No. actually printed (all papers)  | 1 story in 1 month           | 20 stories in 6 months<br>5 feature articles in 6 months<br>1 ad in 6 months | 5 ads in 1 month                     | 6 ads in 2 months                   |

of day when the television and radio spots were broadcast left much to be desired—5:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m., when very few people were even listening. Furthermore, only one newspaper article was printed during the one-month campaign. The campaign failed. In a *postmortem analysis*, Gruenhagen strongly recommended considering buying media time and space to disseminate Extension's messages.

Douglas and others claimed that their radio spots were broadcast a "number of times," although the time of day the spots were aired wasn't specified.

For the print media, Douglas and others were more definite. They reported that 20 news stories, 5 feature articles, and 1 newspaper ad were printed during a 6-month period. No audience exposure or message recall rates were reported by them. It may be fair to say that the campaign succeeded partly because a variety of other channels were also used to reach the intended audience.

In another campaign that succeeded, Salcedo and others (1972) *sought and got the cooperation* of the mass media in the target community at least two months before the campaign. The media personnel were shown, during a meeting, the campaign message and were told its purpose and its target audience.

Thus, this method could be seen as an "idealized" approach to public service campaigns. Note

that they (1972) also used other channels of communications in reaching their intended audience. For example, four sets of mail pieces were sent to all households in the target community at one-week intervals.

Salcedo and others (1972) reported that their television spots were used three times a day for one month; some spots were broadcast for prime time. Their radio spots were broadcast five times a day for one month; time of day wasn't determined. Finally, five ads were printed in the city newspaper in one month.

The findings of Gruenhagen (1969), Douglas and others (1970), and Salcedo and others (1972) raised the question, "What would happen if we use only public service outlets to disseminate campaign information?"

To find the answer, Salcedo and others (1973) used the "classic" approach to public service campaigns, and received very little cooperation from the mass media. The television spots were aired less than once a day for two months; the radio spots were aired five times a day for two months, and only a total of six ads were printed in one city newspaper in two months. Neither of the two newspapers in the other treatment community cooperated with the campaign. The campaign failed.

Furthermore, Salcedo and others (1973) reported that their information campaign was "contaminated." Compared to the 6

newspaper ads that were printed in the newspapers during the campaign, a total of 174 similar articles from other sources were printed in the same papers during the campaign. This was a ratio of 1:29, in favor of the other sources.

In summary, both studies that reported a relatively intensive use of campaign materials by the media also reported successful campaigns. On the other hand, both studies that reported inadequate media use of the public service message also reported that the campaigns failed. Other alternative explanations, for example, variations in the source and the message, seem unlikely.

Note that all four campaigns just reviewed were launched by universities through their respective Extension programs. Also, all four topics were relatively "safe" topics—noncontroversial—with the possible exception perhaps of Gruenhagen's campaign, in which he intermingled the concepts "pesticide use" with "pesticide safety." Salcedo and others (1972) recognized this possible trap. During the pre-tests of their instrument, they found that many people held intense attitudes against the use of pesticides. In turn, the people seemed to be against the *safe* use of pesticides. This problem was met by forcing the respondents to react to these two concepts separately—first to pesticide use, then to safe use.<sup>21</sup>

The data presented suggest that the public service approach

to information campaigns, when used alone, isn't sufficient to generate the type of message dissemination and audience exposure basic to information campaigns. Woods describes how the mass media treat public service spots:

... stations look at public service spots only as a means to fill blanks left from unsold commercial time. One can see indications ... that public service spots do not receive top priority.<sup>22</sup>

Further, public service campaigners often have to compete for media time and space with other campaigners from nonprofit organizations. As a result, the mass media are deluged with more requests for public service time and space than they can possibly accommodate. For example, Efron complains about the "give-me" attitude of information campaigners who smother the mass media with these requests:

Interlaced throughout our TV entertainment, a legion of voices is telling us: to cross at the corner, to use litter baskets, to leave our eyes to the blind, to restrict the number of our children, to get abortions, to adopt orphans . . . .

And this is just a sparse sampling of what we are being told.<sup>23</sup>

Efron concludes that the competitive push for air time by public service organizations has raced out of control. She wonders whether the barrage of pub-

lic service announcements is too much of a good thing.

Previous research shows that under ideal conditions of message dissemination, that is, prime time, television will reach an average of 20 percent of its potential audience with any given message. Radio will reach about five percent of its potential audience with any given message. The print media, because they can be referred back to, will reach at least 45 percent of their audience in 2 weeks.<sup>24</sup> Generally, public service spots normally reach fewer people than other messages broadcast at prime time.

This isn't to say that one shouldn't use public service outlets as a method of disseminating messages to the public. Certainly public service spots are a cheap method of disseminating information. The point is: considering the conditions under which public service spots are disseminated, one shouldn't expect spectacular successes from public service campaigns. The odds against this happening are too great.

### Points to Ponder

First, under conditions of intense competition for free media time and space, a communicator who relies heavily on public service outlets to disseminate his message is likely to get discouraging results if his purpose is persuasion—changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behavior among his

intended audience. In the public service approach, the crucial element of control over the timing and frequency of message dissemination isn't in the hands of the communicator. It's no accident that advertisers and politicians buy prime time and space to reach their audience.

Secondly, in general, the number of people who would exhibit changes in knowledge or behavior or attitudes is almost always less than the number of people actually exposed to a campaign message. Hence, low exposure rates (resulting from poor message dissemination) often lead to "no effect" in information campaigns (see footnote in Table 1).

Thirdly, the more channels used in an information campaign, the greater the chances that a given message will reach the audience. The campaign that uses a combination of mass and interpersonal communication has a greater chance of success than another that uses either type of channel alone. Information campaigners should use other channels (for example, direct mail, posters, interpersonal mediation through small groups, etc.) vis-a-vis the public service approach so that the message can have a greater chance of reaching the intended audience. An alternative, of course, is to buy prime time and space in the mass media, as suggested by Gruenhagen.

A fourth point is that public service campaigners should recog-

nize and appreciate the tremendous pressure on the mass media for free time and space by public service organizations to disseminate similar and/or related messages. Organizations with similar messages should consolidate their efforts and requests for free time and space in the mass media. Consolidation of effort does *not* mean that the message would be the same for all target communities. It means coordinating what messages to give, when, to whom, and how.

It seems that the Cooperative Extension Service in each state is physically equipped for this approach. Extension advisers in many parts of each state could serve as "coordinators" for information campaigns. This approach would be a major step in increasing the efficiency of public service campaigns.

These principles, when followed, won't insure the success of information campaigns. They only increase the probability that the intended audience would have a chance to receive and react to the message. Any measurement of "campaign effect" must begin from there.

#### Footnotes

1. See reviews by Jack B. Haskins, "Evaluation of Effects of Educational and Mass Communication Techniques," *1968 National Safety Congress Transactions*, XXIV (1968), 77-109 and Joseph T. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Com-*

*munication* (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1960).

2. Haskins, *Evaluation of Effects*, p.77.
3. Shirley A. Star and MacGill Hughes, "A Report on an Educational Campaign: The Cincinnati Plan for the United Nations," *American Journal of Sociology*, LV (1950), 389-400.
4. See Mason Haire, *Psychology in Management* (New York, New York: Mc-Graw-Hill, 1956).
5. Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*, p. 17.
6. R. H. Gruenhagen, "The Effect of a Planned Communication Program on Change of Attitudes and Knowledge of the Urban Dweller Toward Chemicals and Pesticides" (Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Virginia Cooperative Extension Service, 1969).
7. Rodolfo N. Salcedo, Clifford W. Scherer, and I. Kathleen Alison, *Effects of a Public Service Information Campaign on Audience Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward Certain Food Buying Practices and Nutrition Information* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, Cooperative Extension Service, Office of Agricultural Communications, 1973).
8. Stanley E. Cohen, "Safety Council Seat Belt Drive Set; Insurance Unit Finds Similar Ad Push Failed," *Advertising Age*, XLIII (June 19, 1971), p. 123.
9. Robert K. Merton, *Mass Persuasion* (New York, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946).
10. Dorothy F. Douglas, Bruce H. Westley, and Steven H. Chaffee "An Information Campaign That Changed Community Attitudes," *Journalism Quarterly* XLVII (1970), 479-87.

11. Rodolfo N. Salcedo and others, *Subreport III: Effects of a Planned Information Campaign on Audience Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward the Pesticide Label and the Safe Use of Pesticides* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, College of Agriculture, Central Experiment Station, Office of Agricultural Communications, 1972).
12. Lawrence E. Sarbaugh, *Measuring Effectiveness of an Information Campaign*, Agricultural Communications Research Report No. 5 (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, College of Agriculture (1962).
13. See Herbert H. Hyman and Paul B. Sheatsley, "Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, XI (1947), 412-23; Klapper, *The Effects of Mass Communication*; Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (New York, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1955); and Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1960).
14. Douglas, Westley, and Chaffee, *Information Campaign*, p. 487.
15. Hyman and Sheatsley, *Some Reasons*. See also, Carl I. Hovland, "Reconciling Results from Experimental and Survey Studies of Attitude Change," *American Psychologist*, XIV (1959), 8-17.
16. Dorwin Cartwright, "Creating Cognitive Structure," in Steuart H. Britt, ed., *Consumer Behavior and the Behavioral Sciences* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1967), pp. 452-54.
17. Gruenhagen, *Effect of Planned Communication Program*.
18. Douglas, Westley, and Chaffee, *Information Campaign*.
19. Salcedo and others, *Subreport III*.
20. Salcedo, Scherer, and Alison, *Effects of Public Service Information Campaign*.
21. Salcedo and others, *Subreport III*.
22. John Woods, "Factors Affecting the Use of Public Service Spot Announcements by Illinois Commercial TV Stations" (Master's thesis, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1965).
23. Edith Efron, "See Here, America!" *TV Guide*, XIX (July, 1971), 4-5.
24. For example, see Alfred Politz, *A Study of Four Media* (New York, New York: Time, Inc., 1953) and Joyce S. Niefeld, "The Future of Radio Spot Sales," *Media Scope*, V (1961), 11.