

Advisor

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The Data

Can you pick a winner by listening?

Predicting elections through voice analysis



The Poll

Can you have too much information?

One of the earliest researchers in non-verbal communication, anthropologist Ray Birdwistell, estimated that "65% of social meaning" between humans is conveyed with non-verbal cues. No one today doubts that gestures, facial expressions, the brand of shoe or fragrance you wear can say things that words alone will not, but researchers at Kent State say they have found a non-verbal way to predict who will win the most votes in an election. They analyzed a low frequency sound made by the voice box called the phonation. The phonation sound hangs out at a super low .5 kHz and has been compared to the tone that exists under the notes played by a bagpipe.

What researchers did was take the voices of 16 presidential candidates in eight presidential debates — every election since debates were first televised. These audio clips were then put through spectral analysis to see whose phonation varied the most. Previous studies by these social scientists and others had already shown that people with lower social status adjusted their vocal patterns to accommodate persons of higher status. Remember, though, status isn't just about money. It may also have to do with power, self-confidence or respect. In fact, while studying 25 Larry King interviews from 1992 and 1993, it was found that King's phonations changed more when he talked to (then) President Bush and *60 Minutes* host Mike Wallace, and changed less than the guest's voice did when he talked to Vice President Quayle or actor/director Spike Lee. This would indicate that King's social status was below that of the first two guests and above that of the last two. When 600 people were asked to rank the relative status of King and his guests, their answers correlated strongly with the spectral analysis.

Getting back to the candidates, when their debate phonations were put through spectral analysis, it was found that the man whose voice showed the least variation did, in fact, win the vote. So far, the researchers are batting .1000. We at Ammerman will be keeping an eye, uh ear, out for them in 2004.

You can try this at home. The next time you listen to an interview, close your eyes and see if you can hear vocal changes in either of the speakers. Don't be surprised if you cannot; it can be a very subtle thing.

By the way, when King interviewed Elizabeth Taylor, it was his voice that did the most changing.

Dr. Stanford Gregory and Dr. Timothy Gallagher
Kent State University
Published in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, V65, no.3

Suffering from TMI - Too Much Information? It may have started with news and weather bulletins, but now it's everywhere all the time and shows no sign of quitting. It is "The Crawl," those headlines, sports scores and celebrity gossip bits that run across the bottom of your TV screen. The news channels run it constantly, even in the shows like *O'Reilly Factor* and *Hannity and Colmes*. The TV screen has never seemed fuller. As Jerry Seinfeld said to David Letterman, "There must be someone that can stop it- it never stops. It's driving me crazy! Do you want me to watch the show? Do you want me to read the strip? What do you want me to do? We don't want to read. That's why were watching TV!"

The Poll: News you can use or a tune out? Marvelous multi-tasking or an annoying distraction? [Click here](#) to tell us what you think of "The Crawl." Tell your friends to vote, too. We will post some responses on our web site and then forward them to the networks.

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The Real World

Our team analyzes NASA on that fateful day

Beginning with this issue of *Advisor*, we will analyze the performance of an entity in their handling of a crisis, or other situation where communication is critical. The criteria will be familiar to those who have attended our Effective Media Communications Workshop and, we hope, enlightening to others.

NASA, February 1, 2003

Less than five hours after Mission Control lost contact with the Space Shuttle Columbia, NASA officials sat down in front of cameras to face the world. Looking shocked but fully aware of the job ahead, weary men took to the mics to begin a process they knew would consume their lives for many days and weeks ahead.

Rule One - Respond quickly. Given the amount of information they needed to gather in order to make appropriate and meaningful responses to questions, five hours is admirably fast. Furthermore, the press needed time to get to the sites, since shuttle landings are no longer routinely covered and because, on a weekend morning, most reporters were at home.

Rule Two - In a major crisis, send out your top people. Let the highest ranking person give the broadest view and express the overriding sentiment. More specific information is usually best handled by those with area expertise. NASA's choice of communicators was exactly right.

How did NASA do in the "Three C's" we talk so much about: Control, Credibility and Confidence?

Control - NASA exhibited control by giving adequate notice of the briefing, explaining the rules by which it would proceed, (one question each, no follow-up, etc.) and then enforcing those rules. Their web page stayed very current as well. Many companies and organizations seemingly forget about their web pages in times of crisis.

Credibility - NASA established itself as believable and reliable through proper execution of Rules One and Two (see above). Their briefing began by first addressing the emotions of the event. Whenever there is loss of life, this must come first. They then explained their priorities: to attend to the families, to gather debris, to scrutinize data, etc. In stark contrast to the Challenger explosion, NASA was forthcoming with information from the start. They seemingly told all they knew. Any behavior perceived as stalling, hiding or withholding diminishes credibility.

Confidence - This is epitomized by Ron Dittmore, Director of Space Shuttle Operations. In short, he serves as a role model to us all. His own shock and sorrow must have been great, yet he brought credibility to NASA by modeling how a professional goes about his duties at a time of personal loss. Dittmore was able to take complex science and make it comprehensible to lay persons. He showed amazing patience with reporters who had no background in aerospace and those who asked previously answered questions. At no time did he seem evasive, and he never succumbed to any of the "traps" we warn about.

In conclusion, NASA did a truly exemplary job of external communication on that day because that is how they had planned it. There was no scrambling to figure out who does what. Those decisions had already been made. This reinforces the aspect of crisis communication we emphasize most: nothing replaces preparation. NASA was exceptionally well prepared and it showed.

We asked an insider about Ron Dittmore, and he said, "Look, nobody gets to the front room (of Mission Control) without being able to communicate in a precise, clear and efficient manner." The front room is the one we see on TV. There are many other rooms that look similar and important work is done in those as well, but only front-room people have access to the "loops", which are closed channels used to communicate with the astronauts. This may be where the phrase "being in (or out of) the loop" comes from. Not only is the comment about Ron Dittmore literally true, it is a fine metaphor as well — one that might behoove us all to ponder.

Overall Grade - A

A final note - Is Ron Dittmore simply a gifted communicator? Perhaps, but the truth is, these

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From the Archive

We have just passed the 20th anniversary of the Tylenol poisonings. This event created an entirely new rulebook for two industries: packaging and crisis management. Our Summer 2002 issue looked at the lessons learned for communicators. Read the article [here](#).

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