

BLISSEMANTICS AND THE MASS MEDIA

The following Essay appeared in Time Magazine on June 7, 1971 and I immediately wrote to the author.

DOWN WITH "MEDIA"

by Henry Grunwald

The professor meant well. Morris Forkosch of the Brooklyn Law School was defending the press against attacks from Spiro Agnew, among others, and urging journalists not to take these assaults lying down. The issue, said Forkosch, would be decided by "the information media, by how it fights back."

It?

On all sides, ostensibly well-educated people in full command of the English language talk about the media in this singular fashion. "The media is to blame for all the trouble," "The media carries only bad news," or (on rare occasions) "The media is the first defence line of American liberties." Webster's that horror of permissiveness, allows the usage. It is, of course, illiterate: "media" is the plural of "medium", hence the media are. The point may seem merely pedantic. But how people speak suggests a great deal about how they think and feel; language shapes philosophy, culture and destiny.

The mental habit of reducing plural words to the singular has been evident before. A case in point is "data", beloved of all social scientists. Data no longer are; they is. "The data is incomplete" or "the data is compelling" turns the concept into a kind of glob-a paste or putty that can be applied to any rickety argument. The origin, quality and meaning of the individual figures are easily forgotten; one data is as good as another data.

To appreciate the damage that this sort of sloppiness can do, it is useful to invoke the late Count Alfred Korzybski, inventor of general semantics. Korzybski was a Polish-born mathematician and physicist, part crank and part genius, who regarded his theory as a whole new science of life. Our language, argued Korzybski does not reflect reality, and its structure does not correspond to the seen or unseen world. Its grammar, based on Aristotelian logic, implies primitive philosophical concepts tied to the prescientific past. All this leads to emotional disturbances and frustrations, known as semantic shock. Korzybski prescribed some mental tricks to guard against this disorder. Take, for instance, the old hit song: "Falling in love is wonderful, it's wonderful. . . in ev'ry way." A general semantist following Korzybski's rules to the extreme would render the line thus: "Fallings in love₃ are wonderful, they are wonderful (to me) in a great many ways."

"Fallings" is necessary because there are many different kinds of falling in love. Love, like most other terms, has many different meanings; hence Korzybski taught that mentally at least, one ought to "index" words, so that love₁ might stand for love of God, love₂ for love of country, love₃ for love between men and women, etc. The bracketed "to me" indicated that love is not equally wonderful to everybody, and the "great many ways" recognizes that virtually nothing in the world happens "in every way." All this may seem obvious. Nevertheless it contains a significant relativist philosophy and much wisdom about the errors, even the insanities, hidden in everyday speech.

Korzybski, where are you now that we need you?

To speak of the media in the singular tends to obliterate the differences between them; it encourages the dangerous habit of not distinguishing a billboard from a painting, the telegraph from the radio, a magazine from a television station, a large magazine from a small one. All sources of information become a great, shapeless monster. One recalls Alexander Hamilton's "Sir, your people is a great beast." More than a grammatical difference lies between this statement and saying "Your people are . . ." There is a philosophical difference as well. "Is" describes the people as a mass, a thing to be manipulated; "are" acknowledges the people as the sum^{of} many individuals.

In his forthcoming book Extraterritorial, George Steiner, literary critic and philosopher of language, recalls the 11th century theologian Peter Damian who believed that man fell into paganism because of a grammatical flaw; "Because heathen speech has a plural for the word 'deity', wretched humankind came to

to conceive of many Gods." The logic of this argument may be questionable, but not the perception that connects language and belief, the word and the Word. Using "media" in the singular reverses the phenomenon Damian observed. It ignores the variety among the many oracles of information and replaces them with one big oracle, or demon. Thus their individuality is obliterated and their separate effects on the public become muddled in vast generalization.

It would help a little if people once again used the plural, recognizing that all media are different. But it would not help enough. The very word medium is wrong, even when correctly used. It is impersonal, disembodied. As British Journalist Katharine Whitehorn observed, it "is a word no human being would naturally use." Its one merit is that it accommodates both print and electronic journalism. But is that really a merit? Even "the press" is a too-collective noun, ignoring variations in the size and spirit of publications. Yet over the centuries, it has become a living term. The press makes noise; it roars and clatters. The press smells of printer's ink and sweat. It has been literally smashed by its enemies and literally saved by its defenders. Somehow reporters who have never seen a composing room, editors who have never set a stick of type (or, these days, punched a computer keyboard) still feel a strong bond to that noise, that smell, that struggle.

A television station, to most laymen, is a little more mysterious, with its invisible signals coming and going. Yet it is real and adventurous place, halfway between technology and theatre, a place of dials and optics, props and makeup. Television stations are seized in revolutions; they are manned and controlled by people. But a medium-what is a medium? What is its sound, its smell? What is its electronic circuitry? Who can seize it? Who and where are its people? In its incorporeity, it's a ready scapegoat word, like State, Establishment, the Right, the Left.

"Medium" is an advertising term, a Marshall McLuhan term. The point of McLuhan's taxonomy was to differentiate between the various "media." But the word, singular or plural, now obliterates the differences he so imaginatively catalogued. TV triumphs and sins with the eye and ear; print journalism triumphs and sins with the mind. The strength of the TV news program is immediacy and presence; its weakness is the inability to look behind the surface. Even the more slowly produced TV documentary has a hard time using images to express concepts, which are often reduced to mere pageant and pictograph. The strength of print journalism is the ability to analyze, traverse time and space for background and meaning; its weakness is a certain lifelessness compared with the kinetic video screen. TV finds it difficult to see a pattern in events even if one exists; print journalism sometimes insists on finding a pattern even if none exists. Both TV and print journalists edit. Because the camera proclaims "I cannot lie, I only show what is there," TV editing is less obvious, but for that very reason it can also provoke more resentment, more of a sense of being fooled, when it is noticed. All these (and more) are distinctions too readily ignored.

The press and TV have been blamed for everything from seducing women into having too many children (in an ad for a book, *The Baby Trap*), to driving Author Erich Segal out of the academic life (in a recent interview). Using the word media somehow makes such specious protest easier.

When people complain about media prejudice, they usually mean that their own prejudice has not been served. When people demand objectivity, they usually want support for their own views. Objectivity is unattainable; to pretend otherwise, to argue that information can be separated from analysis or opinion, means fostering an illusion. What the public does have a right to expect is fairness and professional competence. These are individual qualities, individually practiced or betrayed. To speak of the media in the mass is to ignore that individual responsibility. It allows people to complain without defining their complaints; it allows the self-indulgence of feeling wronged without saying why.

It is probably too late to extricate "media" from the American vocabulary. But let us at least follow Korzybski and "index" what we talk about: medium₂ for news-magazines, medium₃ for large city dailies, medium₁₀ for the underground press, etc. Let us also index critics: critic₁, the troubled reader who is truly confused by some of the vagaries of journalism; critic₂, who has the precise information to expose an error or a distortion; critic₃ for whom the automatic attack on journalism becomes the last refuge of a scoundrel; critics₄₋₁₀, who blame the "media" for the unpleasant realities of the world. Neither TV nor the press should in any way be immune to criticism, but let them be criticized (and praised) for the right reasons.

Mr. Henry Grunwald,
 Author of the Time Essay
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 in the Time issue June 7, 71
 Time and Life Bldg,
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June 11 71

Dear Mr. Grunwald,

Congratulations to your wonderful article. I wish I could stretch my arms across the Pacific and embrace you, because for the last 25 years I had hoped to find a man who really has understood Korzybski, and who explains his semantics in a few paragraphs as you did. I am a subscriber of Time magazine for many years and all I have been fed through the years was the grinning face of THE GREAT SEMANTICIST Hayakawa, the man who wrote "Language in Action", the man who can tell "what words can do to man and what man can do to words". No wonder that the governors of San Francisco State College decided to make him President, because, he, the semantic master of words, would find the right words to mollify and pacify the unruly students. And indeed, Hayakawa rose to the semantic challenge. He uttered just one word "POLICE!!" and 700 policemen descended on the campus. It was the most stupendous semantic demonstration "what words can do to men".

Now, having abreacted in the paragraph above by intense gnashing of teeth through many years, let me come at least to your praise of Korzybski. I, of course can understand your lament and your explanations about medium₁ and medium₂ and medium₃ etc. but how many of the Time readers can understand it too? I think that perhaps one amongst thousands would know exactly what you are talking about. I have seen this happen so many times when I try to explain to intelligent people the fallacies of language and how our thoughts are muddled up by false language. They look at me, but they look through me. I could almost see their brain blockage rising up like a wall, and my words and thoughts not getting through, not getting through at all. I know what they are thinking and here it is: If Bliss and Korzybski are right, if language is indeed the cause of many of our troubles, why have all the teachers and professors of language NEVER told us anything like this. Bliss and Korzybski must be cranks, and this indeed is what most professors of language are ~~thinking~~. Korzybski tried in vain to get the smallest post at a college or university. He never got a post nor a penny. Now he being dead, universities allow that half-dead "Institute of General Semantics" to conduct "workshops" and memorial lectures attended by few and convincing even fewer people.

Korzybski did the very same thing which I did. He wrote his "Science and Sanity" in the most academic science slang, in order to impress "the authorities of learning". My book "Semantography" contains 882 pages about as much as Korzybski's "Science and Sanity" (806 pages). I sent a copy to Time years ago hoping that they will at least put it into their library, or hoping beyond hope that they may even review it. I got it back into my face in no time - by airmail. Cost \$6.00. That editor of the book pages of Time knew a crank when he saw one. And why? Because my book is full of pictorial symbols.

Why pictorial symbols? Because, said Leibnitz 300 years ago, they would depict the real things of our world. Abstract meanings cannot be depicted and this simple test, said Leibnitz "will give us thoughts less verbal and absurd than we now have". And now was the 17th century. Leibnitz could not visualize the 20th century with billions of transistors and TV screen and newspapers and books spouting trillions of lies daily into millions of minds. He could not imagine a Hitler and Goebbels who proved to a suffering world that vague words could drive a sane and intelligent nation like the Germans insane and running amok. But he nevertheless was hopeful when he prophesised that one day/man will realize his hope and ambition.

In 1937 Professor E.T. Bell wrote in "Men of Mathematics"

"The very diffusion of Leibnitz' genius made him capable of ~~the dream~~ which Archimedes, Newton and Gauss missed, the "Universal Symbolism". Others may bring it to realisation. Leibnitz did his part in dreaming it to be possible."

In 1950 Bertrand Russell wrote

"If schools throughout the world would clarify the use of words calculated to promote passion, the existing hatred between nations, creeds and political parties would very rapidly diminish, and the preservation of peace throughout the world would become an easy matter."

and when I presented him with my "Universal Symbolism" which children even in the kindergarten can learn to apply to the words they hear and use, he wrote

"Bliss Semantography... I think very highly of it... an important service to mankind."

In 1951 Professor Oliver L. Reiser eminent logician of the University of

of Pittsburgh and foremost supporter of Korzybski said in his lecture to the American Association for the Advancement of Science on "Unified Symbolics for World Understanding in Science".

"Bliss heroic work...he realised the ambition of the great mathematician Leibnitz."

"What's so heroic about my work? I asked myself. I didn't realise that Reiser knew, namely that the same fate like Korzybski's is in store for me. After Reiser's announcement I was elated. Leibnitz' problem has been solved at last", I said to myself, "now all the mathematicians and philosophers, all the linguists and logicians will have to look up and take notice."

They didn't. I offered Reiser's lecture free to all the members of the American Philosophical Association (over 1250). There were no takers. I offered it to all professors of all faculties and all universities of a great country. No response. My good wife wrote thousands of informative letters to thousands of educators, begging for a test in the kindergarten and the primary school - with dismal result: Nil. My good wife broke down. She was a victim of words. She believed that the words "Alma Mater" meant the university as the "fostering mother" of all new ideas. She did not know that pioneers of new ideas had to be dead first before their writings are elevated to "great thoughts" (see TIME, June 30, 1967. p.30) My good wife died to my intense sorrow.

I turned to the members of the Society of General Semantics in Sydney. I turned to Miss Kendig of the Institute of General Semantics in the U.S.A. I said to them "every tool needs constant improvement. Korzybski improved mankind's most important tool: language, and I have improved on Korzybski."

This was anathema, blasphemy, heresy. I saw their brain blockage rising. I turned to Stewart Chase: brain blockage. I turned to Hayakawa: it was much worse.

In despair and disgust I felt I have to turn to the students and to the common people. Students at Sydney University have written enthusiastically about my lectures. Sixteen years ago I began to convert my highbrow science slang book into a popular "primer" for the intelligent man and woman, boy and girl, a kind of popular picture pocket book. It took me 16 years to finish it and it is now published. I include 4 pages (181 to 184) about Korzybski and Hayakawa.

You must realise dear Mr. Grunwald that I am now 74. I am standing with one foot in my grave and with my other foot I kick vigorously (in order to keep alive) whoever in this mad world of ours needs to be kicked. Today, after Hitler and Goebbels, after the most devastating holocaust caused by vague words, THERE IS STILL NOT ONE UNIVERSITY IN THE WORLD WHICH HAS INSTALLED SEMANTICS AS AN OBLIGATORY SUBJECT. Least of all is it introduced into colleges, highschools and primary schools where it is needed most.

And now your fascinating article has made me hope that perhaps you Mr. Grunwald will take an interest in my work, will take it up, will perhaps review it in TIME. I am not out for the public limelight. I have had my full share of public acclaim as a musical Virtuoso, as an artist, as a lecturer. I want to hand over my work to other and younger minds. Will you be one of the takers? The scope of my work as exemplified in the left margin) is much much wider than Korzybski's ever was. For 29 years I hid under my name only. Now I devised a few months ago this braggadocio letterhead to tell anyone what I really have done - even if it kills me, which indeed may soon happen.

Let me explain to you how the men and women of the "mass media" would get a much better deal if only my improvement on Korzybski's ideas would become known. You and all the men and women of Time belong to this much maligned class. You all should be most interested in the application of my semantics to the men and women of the mass media.

I am waiting for your answer and remain

Yours sincerely,
C.K. Bliss, B.Sc.

June 30, 1971

Dear Mr. Bliss,

TIME Managing Editor Henry Grunwald has asked us to thank you for writing to him about his June 7 Essay "Down with 'Media'!" We were also interested to receive the sample of your work and your description of Semantography. Much as we would like to make comment, we have to point out that we don't feel able to in the space of a letter. What we'd like to do is to keep your letter on file so that when we have occasion again to run a story about semantics or perhaps even linguistics, we can refer to your thoughts on the matter.

We quite agree with you that more general knowledge about semantics would improve our lives in many ways. But taking into account the epigram "All languages begin as poetry and end as algebra", we feel reluctant to reduce our imprecise language too quickly to pure symbolism.

We were glad to hear from you and thank you for writing to TIME.

Sincerely
Gina Mallet.

This was a hopeful beginning to the Managing Editor of Time Magazine, but a hopeless end by that blabbering woman Gina Mallet. I wish I could hit her with a mallet. The End