
The Politician and The Actor – Learning to Communicate on Television

by Kimberley D. Mullins

Television has become a pervasive form of communication in our world and its encompassing nature ensures that any political leader unable or unwilling to use it as a means of communication will be at a distinct disadvantage in getting their message across. In Canada, most politicians will still experience the majority of their public speaking in parliament or other live venues. But, as more parliaments across Canada broadcast their proceedings, and television increasingly becomes the primary medium for receiving information, the ability to communicate on camera takes on added importance. When a politician is unsuccessful at communicating in the television medium, it is common to blame the media for shallow or biased representation, but the reality is far more complex.

The television media cannot be dismissed as *simply* a means of communication. It is not a benign force transmitting information. It plays an active role in the political process on many levels. In order to best communicate with the audience the politician must have as much knowledge as possible about the practical and cultural aspects of television performance. Yet despite the participation of communications directors, press secretaries and media consultants, relatively little attention is paid to the specific requirements of a televised public performance. In this regard, politicians could learn from professional television actors – fellow performers who have studied the requirements of the television medium.

For a politician, understanding performance from the perspective of a professional television actor makes sense because that is also how the audience will understand television performance. Since television has been primarily a medium of entertainment, it has created a society familiar with and possibly expectant of a similar

style of information delivery. The audience's ability to interpret or judge a politician's performance on television will come, in part, from their experiences in watching professional performers in that same medium. Members of the public, of all socio-economic classes, now have access to performance of all kinds on a scale that is historically unprecedented. This has had a tremendous effect on the very cognitive skills of our society. Exposure to regular mediated performance has given the audience a basis for understanding and interpreting what they see. It is rare, however, for the audience to consciously question how they came by this awareness, or what role it plays in their decisions regarding a performer.

The television audience learns to look for and assign meaning to the significance of camera movements, editing and other visual effects of television just as they interpret the actions and behaviours of those characters that fill television screens. The audience watching a political performance is interpreting it with those tools of analysis learned from television, but without any adaptation for the nature of the political performance. They are still drawing upon their knowledge of the format; a format largely comprised of entertainment-oriented performances.

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There are, however, things to be learned from these performers. Actors and entertainment producers know that there are several distinct differences between communicating on television and communicating in a live performance. Actor's manuals for television performance often describe the difference between live oratory and televised communication as a difference in proximity. When speaking in parliament, a town hall or other live performance space, the audience is at some distance from the performer, and it is anticipated that the performer will accommodate those furthest from the stage. Therefore even those in the front row will anticipate a heightened level of performance. The voice will need to be louder, the gestures bigger, and diction clearer. The performer's primary emphasis is not on the subtleties of eye movement or small gestures as they would be imperceptible to all but the closest audience members.

On television the audience is only as distant as the camera, which in most instances is at a close proximity to the performer. In this case, the same subtleties used in one on one communication are highly visible and often magnified. A journalist or editor can focus the audience's attention on a specific gesture or expression, thereby giving it particular significance. A common mistake made by politicians uncomfortable with the television camera is to increase their physical expressiveness. With the camera in such close proximity, it is often necessary to tone down action, and keep eye movements at the level one would use during a close one-on-one conversation. The camera's gaze brings the audience members so close that added movement can have the same impact of screaming in someone's face. The seasoned performer will respond to the camera as they would respond to a colleague standing next to them on an elevator.

The issue of proximity is also an issue of intimacy and formality. When the audience is at a physical distance, there is a naturally assumed formality to even the most uneventful communication. The physical separation between audience and performer will encourage a more structured presentation. The camera eliminates that distance and therefore encourages a more intimate approach to communication.

Professional actors and television producers also know that on television, images have as much meaning as words. Once the performer enters the performance area, all of his or her actions, however unconscious or unintentional, are interpreted as some sort of sign. Whether this sign is directly related to the content of the presentation, or is interpreted as a spontaneous act, it nonetheless assumes a far greater significance because the politician has been framed as a performer.

The audience is directed in their gaze by the camera. They do not have the option of looking at the whole picture, or taking their time to interpret the details of what is being said. The average news clip lasts only 30 seconds, making it imperative that the message is given as succinctly as possible. That means that messages have to be communicated visually as well as verbally. When a politician speaks to television media, their non-verbal communication must match their verbal message. Otherwise, the story will be about the presentation, and not about the information. That means that their actions, their clothing, their tone of voice, and even their physical environment must support their message. Everything included in the communication has to be part of the communication.

Actors know that there is no such thing as unbiased television. Television does not reflect reality; it recreates it. Just as language provides a means of interpreting our reality, and of forming our understanding of it, so does television interpret and alter our perception of the world. Even when images of a parliamentary debate are broadcast without interpretation or comment by a host, there are still plenty of factors that could influence the images that the audience will see. Lighting, room colour and room design will likely be altered to accommodate television cameras. Decisions must be made on what proceedings will receive coverage, as well as what shots and angles will be used. Where will the camera be positioned? Will empty seats be shown on camera? Will the gallery be shown? Will it focus on the person who is speaking or the reaction of those listening? Will the shots be cut to show both, and if so, at what point? These and many other questions must be answered by those in charge of producing this supposedly unaltered documentation of public affairs, and yet it is clear that the answer to any one of those could impact the audience's perception of events. Taking this into consideration, as well as the very fact of the politician's awareness of a potentially increased audience, and the concept of the unobtrusive 'fly-on-the-wall' coverage is no longer a simplistic possibility. In other words, the old axiom that the camera does not lie is not entirely correct. Although the images caught on camera may be irrefutable, the context of the footage can seriously alter interpretation. Television coverage can be, by its very nature, confusing, as it provides images that have been taken out of context. The belief that television has created a world of instant information and irrefutable truth is far from accurate. It is this very pretence of absolute honesty that generates such confusion. It ensures that the audience does not go to any great lengths to evaluate the context of the images they

see. They accept the images of television as factual and honest.

It is not because of the media that performance is inherent in political communication, but it has certainly played a crucial role in increasing awareness of performance in political communication, and demanding additional skills on the part of the politician. Yet the proliferation of television has many potential benefits to the public and the politician. Television offers a much broader audience base than any live rally or gathering could hope to achieve and has the added advantage of being broadcast to those who would perhaps not readily attend such a gathering. Television, through news programs, political specials, parliamentary broadcasts and other coverage, has the ability to introduce a more diverse information base to a more diverse audience.

Yet political performers remain at a disadvantage in this area. This is due in part to a continued cultural reluctance to acknowledge that performance skills are needed by the politician. It is also due to the television audience's misunderstanding of the nature of political performance in many contexts. Without proper understanding of political performance, the very nature of the media can give false impressions, create unrealistic expectations, and change how information is processed and discussed. It is essential that the political performer understand the significance and the requirements of communication through media. It is equally important that the audience receiving that communication be aware of those same factors. A good first step is to acknowledge the necessity of performance in television communication. And, just as professional actors would, take the time to really know what it takes to communicate your message.