

Political Communication In South Africa After Rubicon: A Trend Towards Professionalism?

P J Vorster

As voters have become used to the sophisticated presentation of messages in other spheres, they expect a similar sophistication in political communication. This has opened the way for political advertising in addition to traditional modes of political communication. This paper examines political advertising in South Africa. It looks at political advertising in the Referendum '83 campaign, the communications disaster generally known as Rubicon I and the new approach for Rubicon II. It proposes the utilisation of professionals in the communications field to assist in the formulation of a national communications policy to promote more open and more effective government communication.

1. Introduction

It is a truism that not only *what* you say is important, but also *how* and *when* you say it. This is also true for political communication in South Africa, and the government in particular is often accused of ineffective communication – not only for the content of its messages, but also for the formulation and presentation thereof, as well as the timing. One example of bad timing was to announce a proposed salary increase of up to 106 per cent for Members of Parliament within days after other civil servants were told to accept an increase of 10 percent (cf The Star, February 25, 1986: 1).



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After the State President's speech at the National Party's Durban congress in August 1985, this criticism reached a peak. It was even called the "PR failure of the Century" and the "non-event of the year."

Granted that unreasonable expectations were raised in advance of the event, the speech failed in many respects, even though *content-wise* it contained some im-

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portant statements and hinted at new policy directions (cf Coetzee, 1985: 293-301).

The failure to favourably impress the audience was all the more unnecessary since in the Referendum '83 campaign to promote the so-called tri-cameral constitution, in addition to the traditional mode of political communication, effective use was made of professional advertising consultants.

The Referendum '83 campaign reached a hitherto unattained height in sophistication, only to be ignored for the important Durban speech. The Durban speech is generally referred to as Rubicon I because State President P. W. Botha said his government had crossed the Rubicon from where there was no turning back.

On Friday, January 31, 1986 Mr Botha opened Parliament with an address that was forthright and was generally favourably received, both for its content and its style. This State-of-the-Union address is popularly referred to as Rubicon II, though incorrectly as will be argued later on. While Rubicon I left his supporters dumbfounded and was oil on the fire for his critics, the speech at the opening of Parliament proved to be quite the opposite. On the Sunday following, it was followed up by a major advertising campaign in the Sunday papers and later in other dailies and regional papers as well.

Does this signal a return to the professional approach started in the Referendum '83 campaign?

The question therefore is: can a trend towards professionalism in government communications be expected after the PR failure of Rubicon and the favourable reactions after the opening of Parliament and the following advertisement?

In addressing this question, this paper will consider the style rather than the *content* of political communication and focus on Establishment politics. In this effort it will look at the traditional mode of political communication in South Africa, political communication in the 1980's and identify a possible barrier towards professionalism. The concept of political advertising as a mode of political communication and the

factors contributing to its rise will be discussed, as well as the Rubicon speech, the opening of Parliament and the advertisement that followed. Lastly the question "After Rubicon...?" will be addressed.

2. Traditional Political Communication in South Africa

The future trend for political communication, as tentatively indicated by some factors, will differ fundamentally from the traditional mode of political communication in South Africa. Some of the more salient characteristics of traditional political communication will be discussed briefly. It will also be argued that changes in these characteristics contribute to the rise of political advertising in South Africa. (Only political advertisements in print media will be considered since the broadcast media do not accept political advertisements.)

2.1 Party affiliation

South African political debate has all along been dominated by ideological factors, on the right as well as on the left wing. This partisan politics had the effect of strengthening party affiliation. Voters tended to belong to either the one, or the other of the mainstream political factions.

These factors in turn implied that many people were involved, at least interested, in politics and that a majority could be reached with political messages through their party affiliation. Party loyalty facilitated political communication through the party organisation.

However, today more and more people regard themselves as uncommitted or independent as party affiliation is weakened. For the party leadership it means that fewer and fewer people will be reached through their affiliation to the party.

2.2 Party organisation

As a result of changing socio-economic and political conditions, increased social mobility and urbanisation and the weakening of party affiliation, the strength of the party organisation is receding. Fewer people are still prepared to do street work for political parties and party organisations find its credibility waning. Its messages are no

longer eagerly allowed into the home of the busy, and perhaps disinterested, city dweller.

Alternative modes of reaching large segments of the public are needed.

2.3 Press-party parallelism

The South African press history provides ample example of close links between various newspapers and political parties. Traditionally the National Party could rely upon the support of the Afrikaans newspapers while its opposition could rely on the support for its policies of the English language press (Finn, 1982; Hatchten & Giffard, 1985).

Even the normally loyal Afrikaans newspapers occasionally criticise the National Party and government while, for example, the Sunday Times decided *not* to support the Progressive Federal Party's position on the 1983 Referendum.

Traditionally the newspaper was in a subservient position, acting as the party's mouthpiece. The close tie of press-party parallelism (cf Seymour-Ure, 1974) provided political parties with a great deal of control over political messages. In election times in particular, this support is virtually unqualified (cf Finn, 1982). This is today still the case, though in between elections sometimes better described as one of qualified support.

A favourite form of political comment, often as witty as it is hard-hitting and

unrelenting, was political cartoons. This is still the case, as indicated in Figure 1.

In short, the South African press system as a whole, can probably be regarded as reflecting ideological, partisan politics with a substantial degree of press-party parallelism still in evidence over the whole spectrum of political life, from the left to the right wing.

Nevertheless, though most newspapers are normally loyal to the political party of its choice, no party can any longer rely on automatic, unqualified support and unfiltered dissemination of its messages. In addition, each political party has to reckon with the gatekeeping role of the newspapers that oppose it and support other political parties. *Therefore, loyal newspapers are not enough since apart from communication with supporters, the parties also need to get its messages across to independent and the undecided voters.*

2.4. Interpersonal communication

Mainly interpersonal (and group) communication was used for political discourse. Constituencies were fairly small, the people knew each other well and the candidates were well-known in the constituency. Politics was a favourite topic for discussion and the mass media played a secondary role due to the relatively homogenous nature of communities and the personal touch in politics.

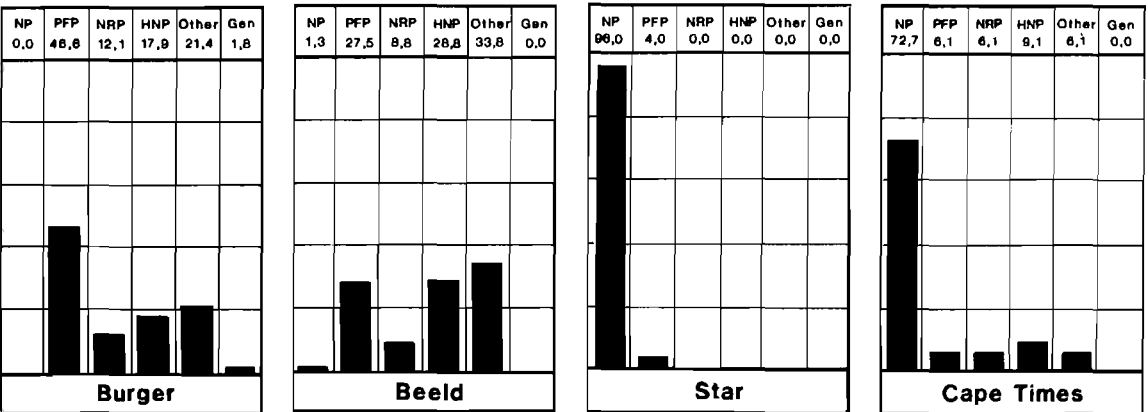


Figure 1 : Percentage of cartoons showing each party in a negative light in 1981 General Election (Finn, 1982:25)

With *inter alia* urbanisation and the weakening of party affiliation, interpersonal and group communication are more and more supplemented by mass communication in order to disseminate political messages.

2.5. Townhall gatherings

The political rally was the commonly used method of getting people together to discuss politics and the platform speaker addressed the party faithful. Remember that a rally “activates and reinforces party loyalties. Its goal is not to convert partisans but to mobilize one’s own and overwhelm the opposition at the polls with sheer numbers” (Nimmo & Sanders, 1981:26).*

If enough of his opponents attended the meeting, it would end in a noisy brawl where rational discourse, of which very little was in evidence any way, gave way to persuasion of another kind!

2.6. Posters

Apart from the role newspapers played in order to promote the policies, candidate and image of the party of its choice, another form of media traditionally used, is posters. These posters are twofold in nature. One kind carried ideological slogans, calling upon all and sundry to unite against the perceived threat and close the (ideological) ranks. The other was more concerned with candidate name identification. It normally depicted the face of the candidate, his name in bold letters as well as the party on whose ticket he was running for office.

2.7. Gatekeepers

Originally a political party was able to get its message to the voters (read: to its supporters) through loyal newspapers acting as a mouthpiece, its party organisation, townhall gatherings and other meetings and interpersonal communication. Relying on party affiliation and partisan support, the gatekeeping role of opposition newspapers was not crippling. Therefore, there existed no serious need for other forms of controlled media and as a result paid space in newspaper was not considered.

Due to the changes in the factors men-

tioned above, the role of the press in political communication increased in importance. Also, the press – as Fourth Estate and acting as so-called watchdog – played an adversarial role and it became a much more effective opposition than the Official Opposition in Parliament.

The need gradually arose for ways in which political parties, and in particular government, could disseminate messages without the interference and distortion implicit in the gatekeeping role of an adversarial press (Cillie, 1980; Dommissie, 1980, McClurg, 1982).

One of the ways in which political institutions can overcome many of these factors mentioned above, is to utilise paid space in order to get its messages across to a large number of people it would otherwise be unable to reach, at least with messages unfiltered through hostile gatekeepers.

2.8. Summary

The changes in the characteristics of the traditional mode of political communication (Figure 2) that have already taken place, will probably accelerate and pave the way for the increased use of political advertising in addition to the traditional modes. As the voters become more used to sophisticated presentation of messages in other spheres, they will expect a similar approach in the political arena as well. Therefore, all political institutions wishing to communicate effectively with the public at large, will have to consider also using paid advertising space with professionally formulated messages *in addition* to utilising the more traditional modes of political communication.

Government is faced with a more serious problem than other political communicators like political parties. The latter can more effectively use the mass media and its ties of press-party parallelism. In a democracy, government is normally not allowed to operate a communication medium

* This was the setting for the Rubicon speech. The context was wrong for allowing foreign TV crews to relay a message intended to mobilise the party faithful to overseas audiences (see 4.2.).

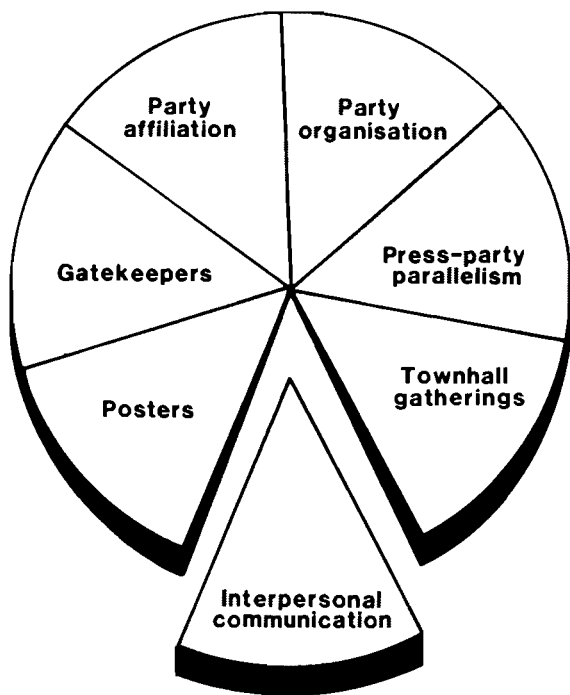


Figure 2 : Traditional mode of political communication

under its control (cf The Citizen affair discussed later on). This means that governments are normally dependent upon the mass media for dissemination of its messages.

A clear distinction must be made here regarding the difference between the political parties as *potential governments* and *the government*. As long as a matter is still within the realm of *party policy*, the party as such is responsible for communicating and explaining it to its supporters and the voters. When that policy becomes *government policy*, government through its agencies is responsible for informing the public about it. Therefore, the various political parties were responsible for communicating their positions on the Referendum '83 campaign, not government.

Since the Rubicon speech and the opening of Parliament represent a major shift in *government policy*, government has the responsibility for informing the public at large – including South Africa's millions of non-voters – about it.

In a democracy where the ideal is to get a pluralism of opinion (cf Merrill & Lowenstein, 1971) government should indeed be encouraged to increase its communication. Then, not only can the "Fourth Estate" judge government on its actions and intentions, but the public can do so as well. The public will be in a better position to judge government, as well as judge the alternative views of the Opposition and the adversarial press.

Refusing government the opportunity to communicate with the public (through political advertisements as an accepted and widely practiced mode of political communication) is just another form of censorship which South Africa can do without; it ignores the liberal principle of the self-righting process and the free market place of ideas. Denying government such form of communication could lead to increased efforts to utilise the SABC for this purpose.

One way to enable government to bring its version to the attention of the public at large to judge without giving government control over a medium (cf the furore that rightly raged over The Citizen affair), is for government to use political advertisements. *Newspapers still have the right to refuse such advertisements.*

Also, as non-political groups increasingly wish to express their views, but often lack platforms to reach public opinion, they will rely on paid space in newspapers.

One example of this use made by non-political groups of paid space to express their attitudes regarding political matters, is the advertisement placed by the Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (The Sunday Star, February 9, 1986:9). It takes the form of an open letter addressed to the State President in reaction to his address at the opening of Parliament.

3. Political Advertising

Kaid (1981: 250) defines political advertising as "the communication process by which a source (usually a political candidate or party) purchases the opportunity to expose receivers through mass channels to political messages with the intended effect

of influencing their political attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors.”

The important aspect here, obviously, is that the message is paid for. The paid aspect of political advertising is important because it gives the source the right to control the form and content of the message, but giving the publisher the right to refuse publication. (In his excellent overview of political advertising, *The election Game – and how to win it* Napolitan (1972) argues why the distinction should be on *controlled* versus *uncontrolled* media, rather than on paid and unpaid media.)

From the various forms of political communication and persuasion, political advertising is probably the most feared. Political advertising and propaganda have been accused of many evils, including the creation of Hitler's Third Reich, the selling of candidates like deodorant, soap, or toothpaste, the creation of images which bear no relation to reality, and the destruction of the political system by emphasising personalities over issues (Boorstin, 1971; McGinnis, 1969.)

The accusation that political advertising, particularly on television, concentrates on candidate images rather than issues has generated tremendous popular controversy over advertising in campaigns at all levels (cf Elebask & Rosene, 1982; Latimer, 1984; Garramone, 1983, 1984). Yet, says Kaid (1981:255), content analyses of television ads do not indicate that their overall content warrants such concern (cf Atkin & Heald, 1976; Patterson & McClure, 1976).

For the dissemination of political advertising messages, political candidates and parties use many channels and formats, including radio, television, newspapers, direct mail, magazines, billboards, various signs, brochures, bumper stickers, buttons, and other paraphernalia. The greatest expenditures usually go for the first four types. Political advertising, however, can only supplement traditional political communication, never replace it.

Like propaganda, mass advertising is one-to-many communication. However, there is an important difference. While propaganda addresses persons as group

members, advertising approaches them chiefly as single, independent individuals apart from whatever groups they identify within the society (Nimmo, 1978: 109-114).

Advertising addresses each as an anonymous individual and the relationship between the advertisement and the prospective purchaser is a direct one – there is no organisation or leadership acting as gatekeeper. Each individual acts upon the basis of his own selection.

The target of advertising is, first, not the individual in a group but the independent, free person detached from the group, says Nimmo (1978: 110). Second, the aim of that targeting is not to identify the person with a group, but to attract one's attention away from it – to get a person to act and choose separately from others. Whereas a group member is gradually stripped of his self-awareness through conformity-oriented propaganda, the individual in the mass is apt to be acutely self-conscious.

Election campaign advertising – candidate merchandising – establishes personal rapport between the candidate and the voter. *Victory depends much less upon the efforts of party organisers and propagandisers* than upon the converged selections of many individual voters only weakly affiliated with political parties or regarding themselves as “independents.”

3.1. Types of advertising

In order to get a better understanding of political advertising, one can distinguish between commercial and noncommercial advertising. The former, of no direct concern here, includes consumer advertising and business advertising. Noncommercial advertising is undertaken by charitable groups, governments, political groups, and political candidates.

Borrowed from the field of commercial advertising one can use the distinction between product and institutional advertising. Product advertising simply promotes the sale of goods or services and its political counterpart is image advertising, appeals directed at building a public official's or office seeker's reputation; informing audiences of a politician's qualifications, ex-

perience, background and personality; and enhancing the election prospects of candidates or promoting specific programmes and policies.

Institutional advertising seeks to promote the good reputation of an industry, firm, business or other commercial enterprises. The assumption is that people are more likely to deal with an institution that they trust rather than one they do not.

The political variant of institutional advertising is conducted on behalf of a group, political party, or government agency.

Institutional advertising, argues Nimmo (1978: 111) bears some resemblance to public relations, but it is best to recognise key differences between these two modes of persuasion. Institutional advertising shares with all advertising the character of presenting and promoting an idea to a mass audience via paid, sponsored appeals. It is essentially an outward looking activity that promotes a product or institution to an audience whose members are rarely members of the promoting organisation as well.

In contrast, public relations conducts both internal and external communication campaigns for an organisation. It is a function of management concerned with communicating to groups within an organisation, to groups outside that institution, and between internal and external audiences. Moreover, a public relations campaign relies not only on paid advertising but even more so upon yet more widespread publicity, i.e., giving wide circulation to favourable facts about the institution through news releases, news stories, magazine articles, television documentaries, etc.

As part of the Public Relations side of politics, good use is made of lobbyists to influence especially key opinion leaders, decision-makers and media figures. This is a still underdeveloped mode of political communication in South Africa.

4. Political Communication in South Africa in the 1980's

Times have changed. The electorate has become urbanised and the spread of the mass media and other socio-economic factors

have created an audience more sophisticated. At the same time the number of "independent" voters has increased, party affiliation has weakened and the power of the party organisation is waning. The traditional modes of political communication alone are no longer reaching the real audience – the uncommitted, undecided and independent.

4.1. A possible barrier

From a *government perspective* the role of the mass media as gatekeeper prevents it from reaching the audience without the message being ignored, filtered, or distorted.

With disastrous results the government tried to overcome the gatekeeping obstacle (from a *democratic perspective* rather seen as on of the required checks and balances) by the creation of The Citizen with State funds.

Government paid the political price for these efforts. The then Prime Minister B.J. Vorster became State President but resigned as a consequence. Lesser figures were also turned out into the political wilderness. In addition, government lost substantially in terms of popular support and credibility.

What is often ignored is that many of the secret projects of the then Department of Information that became public knowledge, were those that had failed. Many of the less controversial projects continued after the disbanding of the Department and many must in all fairness be regarded as successful.

Be that as it may, the then Department of Information caused the government extreme embarrassment and cost it a lot of support. *It is therefore quite understandable that government to this day is very cautious indeed about any communications campaign that might be interpreted as a revival of the old Mulder/Rhodie era.*

The orthodox and the traditional are preferred to the flamboyant and the unconventional. It therefore took about six long years for government to revive an information machinery under Louis Nel as Deputy Minister for Information no longer

accountable to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. (Government's caution is seen *inter alia* by not giving it full departmental status with its own Minister in the cabinet.)

Therefore, the mere fact that the Bureau for Information was created, and made commendable efforts to publicise the State President's opening of Parliament, is an important achievement on the road of recognising the important contribution of communication.

If these initial, careful steps are successful, more brave steps may follow.

One lesson from the Information Scandal is not to try and gain control over the mass media, but rather to utilise paid space in the existing (partisan and adversarial) newspapers as a way to communicate with the public which does not:

- rely on ties of press-party parallelism.
- rely on free editorial space and run the risk of the distortion by gatekeepers.

4.2. Referendum '83

A significant departure from the traditional mode of political communication in South Africa and probably the first use of *professional* consultants for political advertising, was during the National Party's campaign in the months preceding the November 1983 referendum on the government's constitutional proposals.

KMP-Compton's Jannie van Rensburg spearheaded the National Party's advertising campaign. The impact of the political advertisements in reaching voters normally opposed to the NP, forced the PFP to follow suit. It resulted in ads with claim and counter-claim and reached a new height in sophistication in political communication. Issues by and large dominated personalities (see Figure 3).

In political communication where the campaign is characterised by an advertising element, party loyalty counts for less, public relations and advertising techniques come to the fore, and voter surveys help segment and target the market (Nimmo & Sanders, 1981:26).

Due to the votes from traditionally opposition supporters, Referendum '83 was carried by a two-thirds majority. The suc-

cess that was apparently obtained *inter alia* through the use of professionals in the communications field, held the prospect for more sophisticated political communication in the future.

4.3. Rubicon

The State President's speech at the NP's Natal provincial congress, referred to above as Rubicon, indicated that many lessons previously learnt in the NP's Referendum '83 campaign, were either forgotten, or ignored. The government's advisers apparently ignored many of the variables that influence the outcome of communication, such as timing and location. *Or perhaps government ignored the advice from its advisers.* Perhaps they were just too cautious and too hesitant as a result of the "Information Syndrome."

Since this "PR failure of the decade" has been discussed in detail for many weeks, that discussion will not be continued here, except for two remarks.

- Mr Botha's reference to the crossing of the Rubicon was misunderstood as concept in the context he used it, as a study of Roman History will indicate. The actual, *physical* crossing of the Rubicon on the border of Rome wasn't an important achievement for Julius Caesar – the *decision* to do so was.
- The overwhelmingly negative reactions that followed, probably made government realise that it had to do something about the communication gap between itself and the public.

4.4 Opening of Parliament

On Friday, January 31, 1986 the State President opened the third session of the eighth Parliament of the Republic of South Africa. In his State-of-the-Union address he said South Africa had outgrown the "outdated concept of apartheid" (Botha, 1986).

Reaction to the address was generally favourable, in some case reserved, and critical in others.

Finance Week (February 6-12, 1986: 227) said in its editorial "... Botha boldly projected himself as the arch reformist. He could hardly have done a better job."

You don't need guts to vote. You need common sense.

Dr. Van Zyl Slabbert says “no” to the new constitution. Fair enough.

But he's also saying “no” to the inclusion of Coloureds and Indians in the process of democratic government.

As a reformist he proposes “one man, one vote” on a common voters' role. Rather radical, isn't it?

Dr. Treurnicht (the other Dr. No), also proposes a “No” vote. His reason is equally radical. The good doctor wishes to further divide our country by banishing the Coloureds and Indians to undisclosed destinations.

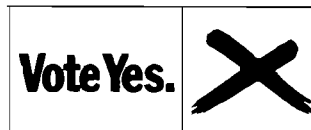
It's unworkable. It's historically ludicrous.

While he's posing as the “protector of the past”, he is in fact the saboteur of our future.

A “No” vote is a vote for left and right wing extremism. No wonder it takes guts.

A “Yes” vote is a vote for your country. Makes sense, doesn't it?

**We're here to stay.
Don't throw our future away.**



Put South Africa first.

Figure 3: Claim and counter-claim in the Referendum '83 campaign

In a front-page editorial *The Sunday Times* (February 2, 1986: 1) said: "When a National Party leader declares that apartheid is outdated and buys double-page advertising space to announce that he has taken the first step towards institutionalised power sharing, only the blind or the willfully perverse will persist in claiming that nothing has changed in this country."

In its comment, *The Sowetan* (February 3, 1986: 4) said: "Perhaps the most significant difference between Mr Botha's speech last week and what is now known as *Rubicon I* was the style of delivery. Even the headline-grabbing part about Mr Nelson Mandela was delivered in more sombre style."

The Business Day's editorial (February 3, 1986: 6) said of the speech* that, in contrast to previous actions, Mr Botha "handled a difficult situation with phlegm and charisma."

In its review of the opening of Parliament, *The Financial Mail* (February 7, 1986: 32-33) said "The rhetoric was Jeffersonian, the delivery modulated, and indeed statesman-like, as if Mr Botha has assimilated the criticisms levelled at him since last August and come out the better for it."

The Pretoria News (February 3, 1986: 10) said in its comment: "Perhaps just as important these days as what President Botha says is how he says it. It is hugely encouraging to see that the President and his advisers, apparently in the new Bureau for Information, have accepted this principle.

"His speech... was crisp, well-written and, for the most part unambiguous... His two-page message in the *Sunday newspapers* was, again, an orderly and well written presentation of his side of the argument.

"The President has, we learn, engaged the services of a Johannesburg-based advertising agency to assist in stating the case.

"While all this may be exceedingly new and strange given the traditional nature of the National Party, its leaders and its pronouncements, it is no bad thing for President Botha to break with the past in this way."

If there is an overseas consensus on Botha's speech, it is that it represents small but genuine movement. The follow-through will be all-important (*Finance Week*, February 6-12, 1986: 221).

4.4.1. Advertising the opening address

The same evening Mr Botha appeared on TV1's line-up, as well as on TV2 and TV3 and several radio stations.

The Sunday following his State-of-the-Union address, a double-page advertisement was placed in the three major Sunday papers and was followed in the week by the same advertisement in all major daily papers and 50 odd regional papers. (Figure 4)**

Some important issues were raised in this, the first real political advertisement since the Referendum '83 campaign:

- Power sharing
- Equal opportunity for all, equal treatment, equal justice
- Full political rights for all
- A single education policy
- The pass system and influx control
- Human dignity
- Encouragement of development

Several aspects of this advertisement stand out. First, its greatest impact was probably due to exploiting the initial optimism that followed after the speech.

Second, its potential impact was probably impeded since the text included so many issues – many of which is fairly abstract.

Third, no indication was given as to how

* Popularly referred to as *Rubicon II*, it implies a misunderstanding of *Rubicon I*. The real achievement was not the crossing of the River Rubicon, but the decision to do so. That decision he had already taken. The Rubicon couldn't be crossed twice. It should perhaps be compared to Caesar's preparation for the ensuing battle. Since a large part of politics deals with talk and symbolism (cf Graber, 1981; Nimmo, 1978; Nimmo & Combs, 1980) the State President's choice of the formal and ceremonial occasion of the opening of Parliament to expand on the new policy direction, is significant.

** Since then the Progressive Federal Party used a similar approach and technique. In a full-page ad in the *Sunday Times* (March 2, 1986: 4) they give a reproduction of government's ad and underneath the heading "Here is the TRUE reality" their views on the State President's message: Another similar approach and technique was employed by the supermarket chain Pick 'n Pay (*Sunday Times*, March 16, 1986: 4) with the heading "Abolish GST on all food. Because that is reality"

REVOLUTIONARIES MAY STAMP THEIR FEET.
THE COMMUNISTS MAY SCREAM THEIR LIES.
OUR ENEMIES MAY TRY TO UNDERMINE US.
BUT HERE IS THE REALITY.

Last Friday I opened Parliament with a speech that will have a profound effect on all our lives. I know for a fact that it hasn't made everyone happy. Quite frankly, that's good. Because I know the people who are the unhappiest. Those who'd rather have bloody battles than peaceful negotiation. Those who'd like to see us capitulate. Those who'd take over this country for their own selfish and cruel ideological ends.

Well, they can shout. They can criticise. They can refuse to acknowledge my sincerity. But, my friends, try as they might, they can't deny reality.

And the reality is this.

MY GOVERNMENT AND I ARE COMMITTED TO POWER SHARING.

We are committed to equal opportunity for all. Equal treatment. And equal justice. Some will say that is rhetoric. Well, consider the facts. Already the offensive racial provisions of the immorality act have been repealed. Job reservations have been removed. Sport is open to all, as are trade unions.

Those who want to seize power shout that apartheid lives. Well, those who want to share power say that it is dying.

That is reality.

I said that no South African will be excluded from full political rights. That they should participate both in Government and the future of this country through their elected leaders. This is now reality. The proposed National Statutory Council is not just a forum for the talkers. It is the first step towards institutionalised power sharing. Where black leaders can now have a voice in central Government and under my chairmanship make a positive contribution to the running of this country.

That is reality.

I said we were committed to a single education policy. I have already created a department to achieve this. Not millions, but billions are being and will be poured into a programme that will mean equal education for all.

That is reality.

I said human dignity must be advanced and any affront to it eliminated. I also realise that the pass system was seen as a major stumbling block. Well, I can tell you the pass system will be scrapped by July 1 this year. What's more a common identity document will be issued to everybody as is the case in other countries. In the near future existing influx control measures will be abolished in favour of a system of urbanization that applies to all South Africans.

Our policy is one of encouraging development. Not controlling movement.

That is reality.

My speech included other points that will certainly have an effect on our lives. I don't intend to stop here. Progress is on-going. But my Government and I are dedicated to it. I know there are some who say I should have gone further. Let them rest assured, I will go further. The wheel of reform is turning. South Africa will never hand this country over to those who would see it destroyed, to those under the misapprehension that solutions lie in aarchy.

Friends, fellow South Africans, that is the reality.

Anyone who thinks otherwise is wrong.

Peace and prosperity will come about for those who are with us. And despite those who are against us.

From my heart I ask you to share in the future.

To share in the new South Africa.



P.W. Botha
State President

Figure 4: Advertising the State-of-the-Union address

government hoped to achieve it. This, obviously, detracted somewhat from its credibility. On the other hand, by giving a specific date (July 1, 1986) for the scrapping of the pass system, it implied dedication to the stated goals.

Fourth, in the advertisement government attempts to indicate its concern with *the situation as it is*. The word "reality" is repeated nine times. This means in 14 per cent of the sentences in the text, the word "reality" is used. This is an accepted advertising technique. By providing many statements with which the reader can agree, it is hoped to get him/her to agree with other statements as well.

A clear limitation here is that as yet there is no *campaign*, only a single advertisement. The technique of repetition should also apply from one ad to the other in a comprehensive campaign. (Would things go so well for Coke if they had a once only advertisement without repetition?)

Fifth, the advertisement was issued with the State President's signature at the bottom, clearly implying his personal commitment to the content above. It also per-

sonalised the advertisement as an open letter.

Sixth, there was apparently some attempt to increase the understanding of the advertisement by achieving a high readability score.

Since one of the main reasons for the use of political advertisements is the attempt to reach the mass audience (voters regarded as spectators, uncommitted and uninvolved) without the gatekeepers (Figure 5) interpreting and explaining the message, a high level of readability is a prerequisite.

Previous research indicates that sentence length (average number of words per sentence) and word length (syllables per 100 words) are often used as indicators of readability (cf Severin & Tankard, 1979: 67-88 for an overview).

One of the best-known readability tests, the Flesch formula [Reading Ease = $206.8835 - 0.846(wl) - 1.015(sl)$] was applied to measure the readability of the advertisement.

The total text consists of 63 sentences, 578 words and 748 syllable (with $wl =$

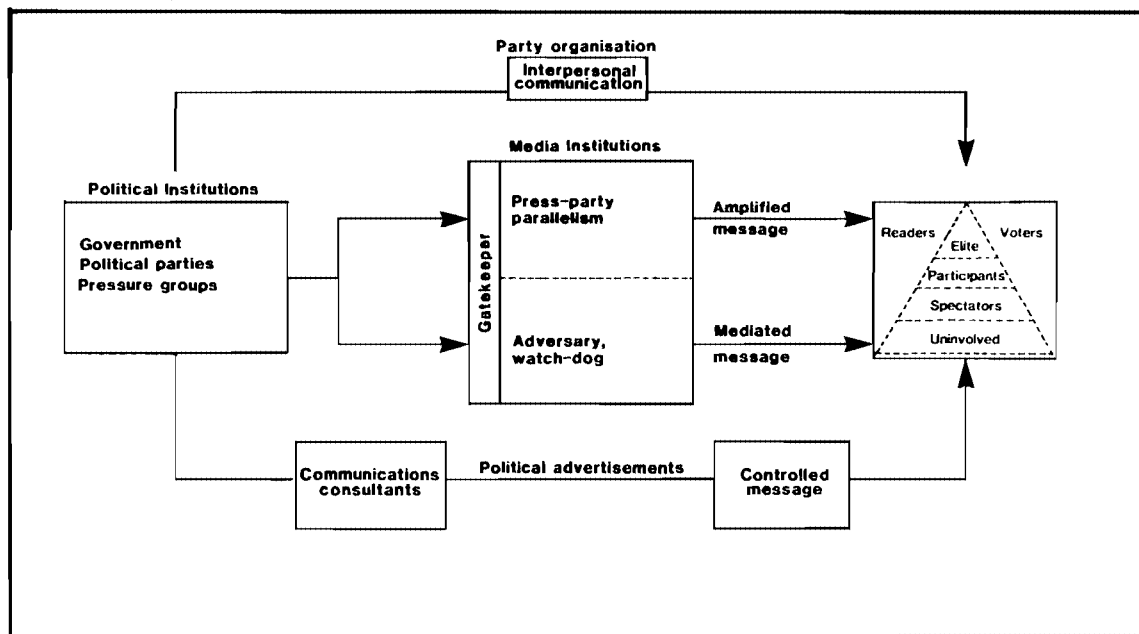


Figure 5 : The supplementary role of political advertisements, circumventing the gatekeeping role of the media

average number of syllables per 100 words and sl = average number of words per sentence):

$$\begin{aligned}
 RE &= 206.835 - 0.846(wl) - 1.015(sl) \\
 &= 206.835 - 0.846(129.411) - 1.015(9.147) \\
 &= 206.835 - 109.481 - 9.312 \\
 &= 88.042
 \end{aligned}$$

According to the chart for interpreting Flesch reading ease scores, this particular text is regarded as “easy” and the estimated reading grade required for understanding, is the 6th grade (in South African terms Std 4).

United Press International uses the following chart to promote readability of its own copy (cf Staper, 1985: 17-27):

Average sentence length	Readability
8 words or less	Very easy to read
11 words	Easy to read
14 words	Fairly easy to read
17 words	Standard
21 words	Fairly difficult to read
25 words	Difficult to read
29 words or more	Very difficult to read

The longest sentence consisted of 25 words and the shortest 2 words with the mean 9.174. Interpreted on the UPI chart, it is scored as “Easy to read” (Figure 6).

The address and the subsequent advertisement created

- an *awareness* of, and
- an *interest* in the new policy direction.

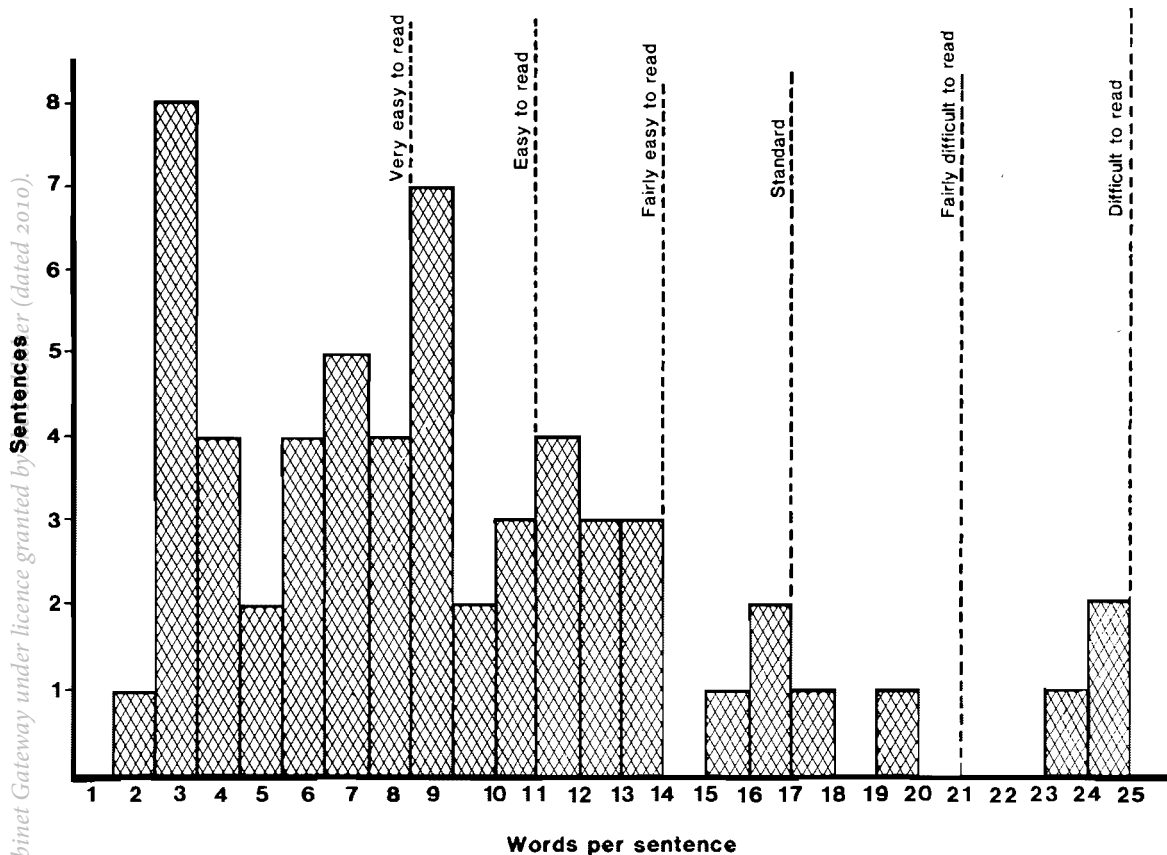


Figure 6 : Rubicon II advertisement according to UPI's readability chart based on sentence length

- It also stimulated a *desire* for more information (and action) which should be exploited in order to achieve its aim of
- *attitude change* and *action* (cf McMillan, 1985: 68-72).

There are, however, some misgivings as to the possible effectiveness of this specific political advertisement. One is that "marketing" can only succeed if there is a product to sell (discussed in 5.1.).

A second misgiving is that to date, only one advertisement appeared in the press. Instead of a sustained, co-ordinated *campaign*, only a single advertisement was so far used (Note 1).

4.5. Preliminary conclusions

A few preliminary conclusions seem warranted:

- Contrary to popular criticism, political advertising in general contains a substantial amount of *issue* information (cf Meadow, 1980: 168-171). The advertisement in question followed this trend, with perhaps even too many issues mentioned. The aim was probably not so much to inform the public about the issues, but rather to create a climate favourable for constructive communication and peaceful negotiation.
- Some critics argued that government should not be allowed to communicate its messages to the public by means of political advertisements, implying a similarity between this ad and the activities of the now defunct Department of Information. This view is rejected.
- In many circles there still exist what may be called the "Information Syndrome". It manifests itself on at least two levels. One is the fear that government will gain control over the flow of information and thereby be in a position to manipulate public opinion. Secondly, the reluctance on the part of government to employ communications techniques other than the traditional and the conventional for fear of the above accusation.
- The most favourable comment was on the new style, approach and presentation of government messages, while the negative comment was based on the

content. Many people expressed appreciation for the State President's new approach, but are waiting for action to follow his words.

- Therefore, though the government has not yet fully re-established its credibility, it at least established a more favourable climate for communication and negotiation.
- A new trend in the mode of political communication is emerging with more and more groups using this form of communication. Political advertisements will probably be used more and more. One reason for this is the consumer-oriented voter public. A second reason is the novelty effect of this new mode of getting political messages across when party loyalties and party affiliation are weakening. A third reason is the recognition that copywriters can say something in 100 words that politicians need 10 000 for. Fourthly, it gives the communicator control over his message although the gatekeeper and the political commentator will continue to play a crucial role.
- *Successful communication will now depend on continued professionalism in the formulation and presentation of messages, as well as providing action for the contents.*

5. After Rubicon?

A fresh start was made with the State President's State-of-the-Union address when he opened Parliament for the 1986 session. The question is what will happen now?

Will the effort to publicise this address end here or will it continue and expand into a proper, co-ordinated campaign?

5.1. Action speaks louder...

Writing in the previous issue of *Communcare* before he was commissioned as one of the consultants behind this advertisement, Darryl Phillips of the Grey Group (1985: 77-79) hinted at a possible approach to this type of political advertisement.

In essence, he said, the government quite simply has to sell "reform" as a commodity, a consumer product which will add something to the lives of its adherents

much like any other product they purchase.

“While the product being ‘sold’ is somewhat more esoteric and crucial than soap powder or fast foods, *the techniques remain the same* (italics added).

“The crucial element in this marketing exercise lies in the availability of the product. When selling any other product, it is to be readily found on store shelves. ‘Reform’ is not as palpable, but it should be no less real.

“If ‘reform’ is to sell well,” he stressed, “the government will have to ensure that it is readily available to the public for first-hand experience. *It is pointless to market a product which does not exist, except in the imagination of its designers*” (italics added).

Since it is pointless to market a product which does not exist, the success of this marketing exercise is now greatly dependent on action on the part of government (accepting of course that there are intervening variables not discussed here).

However, no amount of PR and no slick political advertisements will polish South Africa’s image without deeds. Like the hamburger without the beef, the government’s messages, if without real action, will be rejected out of hand.

Action, after all, speaks louder than words.

5.2. Professionalism

The Bureau for Information gave indication of a professional approach to its job. It didn’t hesitate to call in two of South Africa’s top agencies. The result of the combined effort is there for all to judge.

The real test is now no longer whether the Bureau (organisationally still in its infancy) will be able to do its job, but whether government is prepared to listen to its advice.

Criticism such as that of Finance Week (January 30 – February 5, 1986: 162-163) which refers to the establishment of BI as a “Communications octopus in government’s pipeline,” will have to be answered by its performance in the field.

Beeld (February 2, 1986: 7) discusses what can be done to disseminate the State

President’s address and the advertisement to overseas audiences. The inability to do so, it calls “astonishing.” Beeld says that some of the best brain power in the country is involved in searching for constitutional solutions. The same should be done to develop a marketing campaign.

The Department of Foreign Affairs will continue to be responsible for *international* communication with BI restricted to *national* communication. *This will require close co-operation.*

Government’s stated policy of privatisation should be kept in mind in order to exploit the existing marketing potential of private enterprise rather than try to duplicate it. If the above example is anything to go by, this will apparently be the case.

5.3. Collective responsibility

Two clear requirements emerged so far for effective marketing of the government’s new policy directions. The first is that action is needed. Steps on the long and arduous road of reform must be seen to be taken by government. The second is that, based on this action, a professionally planned, sustained and co-ordinated campaign must be launched. A third, vital requirement is implied in this: collective responsibility.

Without the total commitment of government, elected persons as well as top officials, no campaign can succeed. As long as communication is seen as a last resort, as a gimmick, as something to try when all else have failed, it, too, will fail.

Communication to be effective, must be considered from the first step in the formulation in policy, not added afterwards. It is more important to believe in the contribution of communication and plan with this in mind – and to recognise its limitations – than to have flamboyant and secret operations.

What is required on the part of government for success, is to realise the contribution of communication to achieve the stated goals, a firm dedication to utilise communication to its fullest potential, and accepting collective responsibility for its planned and goal-oriented use.

6. Conclusion

In this paper the focus was on conventional political communication in the Establishment context, excluding the use of intimidation and other forms of symbolic and instrumental violence. That would require a paper on its own. Even if not regarded as a legitimate mode of political communication, violence remains a very real one that cannot be ignored.

It was suggested above that the *actual crossing* of the Rubicon was not a great achievement. The real achievement was the *decision* to cross. But, with that decision taken, with South Africa's Rubicon crossed, there is no turning back.

While it is up to government to exploit the positive climate created by the address at the opening of Parliament, and to provide the brave and courageous decisions for the contents of its messages, it is up to its agencies, in particular the Bureau for Information, to skillfully present these messages to South Africans and others waiting for the implementation of the plans that must follow after the crossing of the Rubicon.

Mr Botha, says the Finance Week (February 6-12, 1986: 227), introduced a new frame of reference by which all government's future actions, and the entire SA political debate, will turn from now on. In a half-hour, he regained the initiative.

"But in doing so he has set expectations inordinately high. If he can match them, so much the better. If he cannot, the consequence will be far worse than if he hadn't tried in the first place."

Therefore, government is urged to establish a *Communications Advisory Board*, drafted from professionals in the communications field in order to assist it in formulating a *national communications policy* and to advise government on its implementation.

The purpose of such a communications policy is to facilitate communication and promote the free flow of information, not propaganda!

The precedent for this is clearly established: just as the government is advised by the State President's Economic Advisory

Board, it should ask and consider advice on matters pertaining to communication by professionals in this field.

Finally, one important question must still be answered by each reader: since *content-wise* there are important similarities between the Rubicon speech and the State President's address at the opening of Parliament, what really caused the widely divergent reactions? To what extent can this difference be described to the lack of communications planning in the first case and proper planning in the second?

The aim of this paper was not only to strive for a better understanding of political communication in general and political advertising in particular, but also to argue that if the communications dimension is ignored, the results can be disastrous.

With Oliver Cromwell we agree: when men run out of words, they reach for their swords – therefore, what South Africa needs is more action, not more bureaucracy, and a continued trend towards professionalism.

NOTE 1

Since going to press, a second advertisement quite similar in style and approach was placed in the major newspapers (see THE CITIZEN, April 24, 1986: 15).

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