The Role Of Silence In Communication: A Case Study Of Ohioan Mark Hanna

Jeffrey Nelson
Kent State University—Trumbull

Leading oral–communication textbooks at the collegiate level stress the importance of the spoken word. They have little to say about the place of silence in the communication process. (See, e.g., Lucas; McCroskey; Osborn and Osborn.) Such an approach by the authors of these texts does not appear surprising since the communication courses for which the books have been developed emphasize the value of speaking in our American culture. The texts mirror the courses.

Significant Silence

Yet a number of researchers (e.g., Brummett; Bruneau; Scott, *Dialectical Tensions*) have done considerable work in the area of silence and have published significant findings on the role of silence in oral–communication activities. While quiet can contribute positively to some communication occasions (Scott, *Between Silence* 110; Scott, *Rhetoric and Silence* 147), it can have a negative impact in other situations. For instance, Brummett has shown that onlookers often associate passivity and relinquishment with a person who chooses not to speak in some circumstances. That person is viewed as a "silent, passive persona [who] has relinquished control over defining and shaping the world" (Brummett 293).

In a situation of controversy, Noelle–Neumann notes that if the individual representing one side remains quiet for a substantial length of time, observers frequently identify that individual as having given up and as having silently admitted that the opposition's point of view should be the prevailing one (44). Noelle–Neumann with this description provides an apt illustration of the passive, relinquishing persona described by Brummett (293–94). Moreover, as Johannesen states, the individual cannot avoid being characterized by others due to his or her silence: "listeners and observers will attach meaning to the silence whether the

sender wishes so or not" (29).

Since silence, then, in a kind of paradoxical fashion plays such a critical role in many oral–communication situations, it is this paper's contention that in fact silence deserves more attention in oral–communication courses. It also deserves attention in other curricula in which occasions of oral communication present themselves for study: political science, history, social psychology, and sociology.

While not denying that silence can exert a positive impact in some communication situations, this paper concentrates on the negative, the harm that can be done by a failure to speak. The project focuses on Mark Hanna, regarded as one of the most powerful and astute politicians in Ohio's history (Knepper 270–71; Roseboom and Weisenburger 246). Hanna's activities at the 1900 Republican national convention form the basis for examination.

The remainder of the paper (1) provides a background for Hanna's communications at the 1900 convention; (2) offers a critical analysis of the communications, with special notice paid to his silence; and (3) suggests some conclusions for the benefit of students interested in the communication process.

Background

As their 1900 national convention at Philadelphia came near, Republican Party officials showed little interest in creating an exciting meeting. They simply wanted to stress throughout the convention the good times brought to the nation during President William McKinley's first term (Croly 302–03). After all, it was under McKinley that the United States, through its triumph in the Spanish American War, took a position of power on the world stage (Leech 328). Probably much more important to the average American was the improved economy. From 1896 to 1900, the balance of trade turned in favor of the United States, adding up to greater sums of money in circulation. Large–scale industrial expansion occurred, and unemployment went down from nearly 10% to 5%. Wages went up 5% while the cost of living remained basically the same. Farmers, too, shared in the bounty as their earnings rose 8% (Faulkner 22–26; Noyes 267–72; Thorp 137–30; United States Bureau 70–74, 90–93).

Indeed the only potential drama for the June 1900 G.O.P. meeting centered on the vice–presidential nomination. McKinley's first vice president, Garret Hobart, had died in 1899, and at convention time the office remained vacant. Through the first five months of 1900, a variety of names turned up in Republican leaders' discussions concerning the position, but at the beginning of June one man stood above the rest—Governor Theodore Roosevelt of New York (Leech 536; Morgan 493–94; Olcott 2: 267–83).

By 1900, Roosevelt had certainly made his mark as a prestigious representative of the Republican Party. He had served in the New York State Assembly, as head of the U.S. Service Commission, as President of the Police Commission of New York City, and as an Assistant Secretary of the Navy, appointed by President McKinley in 1897. At the outbreak of hostilities with Spain over the Caribbean in 1898, he had resigned his navy position to join the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, better known as the Rough Riders. His wartime feats had made him a national hero, and he had returned to New York State in September 1898 to mount a successful run for the governorship. Later, he had won a large group of party supporters by traveling across the nation in the autumn of 1899 and campaigning for G.O.P. office–seekers (Morgan 489; Pringle 197–98; Roosevelt 270–72; Thayer 135). Thus, at convention time in 1900 Roosevelt's status among his fellow Republicans stood high.

However, Roosevelt's status did not appear so lofty among the McKinley inner circle. Whether it was the New Yorker's notable egotism, his often self–righteous attitude, his restless and energetic personality, or that he was an Easterner, the president and his political associates showed little enthusiasm for inviting Roosevelt to become part of the chosen few in Washington. Mark Hanna, the president's closest political confidant, especially disliked and distrusted the New York governor and certainly did not want him in the nation's second highest office (Croly 310; Leech 529; Morgan 489).

Analysis

Hanna's objective to keep Roosevelt off the G.O.P. national ticket would seem to have been helped by the New Yorker himself who insisted that he did not want the vice–presidential nomination (Pringle 221). In fact,

when Hanna arrived in Philadelphia several days before the convention's start, he felt little need to stay downtown where most of the delegates were lodging. Staying there, of course, he could have sensed any movement among the delegations toward Roosevelt as McKinley's running mate and tried to ward the movement off. But Hanna took the New York governor at his word and assumed that Roosevelt had no real interest in running for vice president (Croly 311; Leech 535–36; Morgan 493–94).

So, instead of spending his pre–convention days near the convention hall and the headquarters hotel, Hanna chose to stay with friends at a suburban Haverford home, ten miles from the center of Philadelphia. Besides his lack of concern about Roosevelt, Hanna's overall health was not the best. His rheumatism was especially bothering him, and he apparently felt that a subdued, relaxed setting would suit him well (Leech 536; Morgan 493–94).

It would be difficult to quarrel with a man like Hanna for his choice. He had successfully managed McKinley's 1896 presidential run, gained the friendship and respect of G.O.P. officials throughout the nation, and secured a U.S. Senate seat from a major industrial state. Clearly, he had shown his ability to communicate well in a political environment. His decision to take a few days of relaxation in a spot where obviously he could not closely observe the activities of the delegates and speak with them on a personal level did not seem rash.

While Hanna was silent from a distance, Roosevelt was quiet too, but in an up–close manner. The governor, who could have stayed home in New York, chose to go to Philadelphia, like Hanna arriving days before the start of the convention. But Roosevelt stayed downtown with most of the other delegates. He remained notably quiet, making no public statements to the press or the delegates, except in a case or two when he confirmed his lack of interest in a vice–presidential candidacy. And he did this only after being pressured by reporters to make a pronouncement on the issue ("A Day"; Pringle 221). On the other hand, the New Yorker performed actions that brought attention to himself. He spent considerable time walking about hotel lobbies and visiting the headquarters of different delegations. Moreover, when he appeared, instead of wearing the hard straw summer hat commonly used by the conventioneers, Roosevelt donned the broad–brimmed black felt piece

often associated with the Rough Riders, the same hat he had worn in his 1898 gubernatorial campaign. So much attention did he attract that one veteran G.O.P. observer declared, "Gentlemen, that's an acceptance hat" (qtd. in Olcott 2: 271).

Roosevelt's silence, then, instead of showing passivity or relinquishment on his part, created what Brummett would call an air of "mystery" (290). Allegedly, the governor had no craving for the vice presidency, yet his nonverbal actions put him at the center of the delegates' attention. Those delegates were left to wonder what the New Yorker really wanted. In some instances silence can bring great popular interest to bear on a public figure (Brummett 293), and Roosevelt certainly knew how to arouse that interest.

In the days before the convention's start, the New York delegation's enthusiasm for its favorite son quickly spread to Pennsylvania and then to California. The idea of picking a popular vice–presidential candidate complete with wartime heroics subsequently caught on with delegates from all over the country. By the time Hanna moved into the Walton Hotel on the day before the convention's opening, the G.O.P. stewards had as good as chosen Roosevelt for the vice–presidential spot (Croly 315–17; Leech 535–39; Olcott 2: 271–81).

Once the Ohio senator realized what had happened, he did try to stop the Roosevelt stampede by going to delegation heads and personally pleading with them to withhold their support from the governor. Hanna even sought the support of the president who had remained in Washington, supposedly too busy with affairs of the nation to attend a partisan political meeting. But McKinley chose to maintain his own silence on the matter, refusing to say anything that might sway the delegates from Roosevelt, the president thus playing a passive role as he refused to interfere with the work of the delegates. Hanna ultimately met with no success in his effort to deny the New Yorker the vice–presidential nomination (Croly 315–16; Leech 537–39; Olcott 2: 272–81).

Hanna's silence during the time before the convention had brought irreparable harm to the senator's cause. If he had put himself in a position where he could have pleaded his case with key delegation representatives as the Roosevelt tide began, maybe he could have given pause to the movement. Instead, his silence demonstrated a real passivity on his part.

It must have indicated to the conventioneers that Hanna was in fact relinquishing control of the vice–presidential nomination to them. The Ohioan, through his lack of talk, had signified to his G.O.P. audience that he was giving up his power on a critical matter.

Conclusion

On the first vice–presidential ballot at Philadelphia, Roosevelt received 925 of 926 delegate votes. The New York governor, in a purported display of humility, had refused to vote for himself (Olcott 2: 283). The McKinley–Roosevelt ticket swept the nation in November, and in 1901, at McKinley's death, the New Yorker assumed the presidency. One could speculate that if Hanna had not kept silent in the days just before the 1900 G.O.P. convention, Roosevelt might never have risen to the United States' highest office.

In the cases of McKinley and Roosevelt at the Philadelphia meeting, silence apparently suited their strategic ends. By staying quiet, McKinley demonstrated to the delegates that they indeed held significant power—the president trusted them to make the correct decision on the vice–presidential nominee. Such a move by the G.O.P. leader could not help but unify the party as it faced the fall election campaign. And Roosevelt, of course through his quiet manner, probably called more attention to himself than if he had spoken, an especially effective tactic for someone wanting something from a particular group of people.

Hanna with his silence, though, looks to have been a major failure, and here is the lesson upon which contemporary students of communication ought to dwell. What the Ohio senator's performance documents is the danger of a communicator taking anything for granted, of his or her displaying to listeners a silence signifying a passive stance, thus implying that the communicator has no advice to offer them on matters at hand. Though Hanna acted in the political arena, his example serves as a warning to individuals communicating in any social environment.

Students need to learn that silence may help them attain an important objective, as was the case with McKinley and Roosevelt. They also need to understand that in some cases a person's silence communicates the message that listeners should do whatever they wish without close regard

for the person's sentiments. Finally, students must realize that just as talk often generates serious consequences, so does silence.

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Biography

Jeffrey Nelson is an associate professor of Communication Studies at Kent State University—Trumbull. He received his B.S. degree at John Carroll University, his M.A. at Miami University (Ohio), and his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. Nelson may be reached by e–mail at nelsonj@trumbull.kent.edu.