

## INSTITUTIONS, INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNICATION

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One could begin about 3000 years ago, when it was natural for people in a reasonably well developed agricultural society to see a subtly tensioned connexion between the degree of wisdom spoken by the mouth, and the understanding of the meditating heart (1); the fulfilment of the principle of true community and the increase of the land (2). And one could pause there and reflect on the words of a contemporary prophet, "We are (now) far too clever to survive without wisdom." (3).

But, for our purpose, a more appropriate point at which to begin to reach an understanding of the present state of communication in New Zealand farming may be the Europe of a mere one to three centuries ago. It is from the tumult of agricultural and industrial revolution then, its origin and its aftermath, that many of the attitudes of modern New Zealand farming stem. When we think at all of that era, it is often to recall names like Tull (inter-row cultivation), Coke (crop rotations), Boussingault (understanding of nitrogen's role), Blomfield (improver of permanent pasture), Bakewell (animal breeding) and so on. Without delving further, it may be as well to remember that:

- (1) People of this ilk tended to be not so much discoverers as definers and assemblers of the discoveries of former generations living close to the land;
  - (2) All were farmers – practical and observant or wealthy and observant;
  - (3) Especially in the case of the Englishmen, they tended to be classed among the winning survivors, the new elite of material technology, emerging from a time that was brutally oppressive towards most people on the land;
  - (4) Disciplined agricultural science, as we would now understand it, was only beginning to re-emerge under the implied patronage of the landed classes.
- (4)

This is not the place to juggle the historical chickens and eggs. It is clear, however (or it seems to me), that our modern farming, with its twin gods of technology and profit, is founded not only upon the manipulation of chemicals in soil, species in pasture, genes on chromosomes, but also upon the manipulation of people. This was particularly so in relation to ownership and control of land. The concept of husbandry moved away from having much in common with the concept of community. The word *communicator* became a comfortable euphemism for the person or institution speaking from a position of manipulative authority.

These ideas may seem strange in the context of a languidly pretentious national society, 20,000km and more than a century removed from the England of the Enclosures, which seems to have forgotten the ethics of both husbandry and community. Nevertheless, I believe they hold true. We seem to have lost sight, somehow, of the point that the words *communication* and *community* stem from the same Latin root which has to do with people holding things in

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common. When one group of people says to another, "You must believe or behave as we say," that is not communication.

*"Human beings appear to be sufficiently selfish and calculating to be capable of infinitely greater harmony."*

— E.O. Wilson, 1978

At worst it is elitist, manipulative, indoctrination. At best it is well-meant patronage. Often, it is manipulation or patronage of the insecure and humble by the insecure and ambitious. There's a lot of it about; in the politics of central planning, in education, in social movements, in what's left of religion, and also in the field of agricultural technology. (5)

The vehicles for social manipulation include the printed page, the rostrum, the VDU, the broadcast. These are not primary mechanisms of communication. They are merely carriers of words and symbols.

*"The structure of reality is not self evident;  
The structure of the scientific language is not self evident . . . . .  
... all our prejudices about the outside world tend to be built into  
the language of science."*

— Brownoski, 1978

The primary mechanisms of communication are always in the perceptions and responses of the individual reader, listener, viewer. Secondary mechanisms include group dynamics. Compare, for example, the level of response among individuals following a yarn in the pub on sale day with the response following a solitary viewing of a televised Government extension programme. So often, one hears self-styled "communicators" voice their frustrations: "If only the stupid freezing workers could see what they're doing to their own industry.....", "If only the stupid cockies would feed their ewes a bit better before tugging....." These, I think, are often implied confessions by people who have themselves not been reading, listening, seeing with sympathetic perception and are therefore not communicating. People (including journalists and farmers) with some awareness of basic economics and biometrics often infer that it is shameful for a person to be below the median in (a) the pace at which the community's material wealth is siphoned off or (b) the rate at which gift-wrapped technologies are adopted. I think we really understand that we are acting out a fallacy and that this explains some of the widespread frustration of our time. Nothing draws people more tightly into an inward-facing circle than a shared frustration tinged with guilt. And so is born the most damnably negative aspect of human institutions. As long as I face the centre of my circle, it is easy to see my group in a box on which is stencilled the words "Press" and "Righteous". It is then easy to run everyone outside my circle mentally through the drafting gates into other boxes where they fuse into faceless blobs labelled "Irrelevant Research", "Weak Extension", "Sloppy Producers", "Inept Meat Trade," "Visionless Government," and so on. The other boxes can be seen in a fairly neat ring around mine, straining against each other, the assembly moving only spasmodically and then in directions I don't think are appropriate.

That, you may say, is just human nature. And that, I would reply, is precisely the trouble. I confess that the Press has done much to promote the myth of faceless blobs while often failing abjectly to perform its first duty which is to *listen* — listen to the questions posed and responses offered among all those among whom we are supposed to exist as vehicles for true dialogue. But we are

certainly not alone in this. Whether by merit or default, the *New Zealand Farmer* is more deeply read by farmers than any other journal in this country and its contents are reputed to stimulate more practical response in farm management decision-making than any other single mass medium. Part of the reason is that we see ourselves not as a one-way information pipeline to farmers but as a vehicle for a constant cycle of dialogue embracing them and those who work with and for them. (6)

It is depressing to note that few people within the farming industry's research and development institutions appear to regard this dialogue as being pertinent to where they are at. The ratio of research and extension workers to farmers in this country is in the vicinity of three per hundred. In 1980, we conducted a survey, asking readers to criticise our service. The proportion of research and extension workers among total respondents was considerably less than 1%. Informal discussion with workers in research institutions indicates a high degree of selectivity in reading from the popular farming press. There is a heavy bias towards articles in which immediate colleagues or institutions are mentioned; less attention to the subjective impressions and questions expressed by farmers. Partly, perhaps, because of pressure on time, this tendency seems to become more pronounced as one moves up through the hierarchy of research policy-makers.

One must, of course, acknowledge at this point the magnificent effort by this association at breaking down barriers of information flow and, equally, acknowledge that research workers who are Grasslands Association members tend to be among the exceptions to the rule. One must also acknowledge that farmers, and others who lack scientific training, are often wrong. Nevertheless, we have not come so far down the road towards a bureaucratically controlled farming industry that they ought not be listened to as partners. It may be disconcerting to a pasture ecologist who seeks to convey a recipe for dynamic raising of a whole production system to find that the farm manager is more interested in the quality of galvanising on staples, or in the market for second mortgage finance to allow purchase of adjacent land with a consequent fall in overall production. But if he doesn't accept that there is where the farmer is at, and learn to understand why this is so, he may as well retreat to an ivory tower and lock himself in. Stupidity, always, is in the eye of the beholder. Is it not stupid, in the eyes of farmers, to establish priorities and programmes of institutional work on application and extension of technology in isolation from the 45,000 or so staunchly individualistic entrepreneurs who will make the only effective decisions according to the pressures, opportunities and prejudices each perceives? I hasten to emphasise that I am speaking not so much about the disciplined pursuit of base knowledge (with intra-discipline communication) as of farm systems-development projects and extension strategies which figure prominently in some institutional programmes.

There are, of course, farmers who are criminally inefficient users of resources — just as there are journalists who abuse facts and research workers who are rather selective with data. Yet farmers have always been numbered among the greatest developers of technology. Inside the first quarter of its 100 years of publication, the *Farmer* had reported on how carefully observant farmers using some degree of control in their trials had identified superior pasture species and strains and evolved controlled grazing systems not noticeably different from those now advocated. Profitable approaches to topdressing of permanent pasture were identified. Such watershed innovations as the shearing handpiece, cost-efficient

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fence designs, the herringbone cowshed, kiwifruit production systems all stemmed from farmers who used the fruits of science but were rarely aided by professionals in their development of new technologies. (7)

The story goes on. True, the successes of on-farm innovators are seldom verified in terms of statistical analysis. Farmers, it is often said by professional researchers, tend to observe what they want to see and to act upon incomplete information. So what? Given the intricacy of the biological and economic systems they work in, who can claim to offer recipes that are both positive and failsafe? Are failures in the field, generally confined to the consequences of one person at a time exercising free will, not also sources of valuable knowledge? Has the debate and experience following the Bernie Davis approach to dairy grazing management had an adverse effect on the confidence with which most farmers now make production decisions? What should farmers make of the fascinating saga of "Ruakura and the Zinc Lady?" Why do people in research institutions seem to be so ready to subjectively rubbish deviant farm practices — the hill farmer doing remarkably well without phosphate inputs, the dairy farmer making good money while leaving all his gates open — and to be so un-ready to properly investigate what is happening in these systems? (8)

Frustration is often voiced within the institutions of technology about the so-called information explosion. There remains a wish in some quarters to extract a great mass of data from hundreds of filing cabinets and floppy disks and send it out to all in a centrally controlled, "on-line" torrent — (9). I would caution again that this is not communication.

*"If the computer doesn't enable us to simplify our organisations  
it's being abused . . . .  
The question is not, 'How many figures can I get?' but 'What  
figures do I need?'"*

— Drucker, 1970

Communication begins with listening and continues with dialogue. My listening leads to the conclusion that the most productive and profitable and soundly farmed land is usually in the hands of people who hold to a principle of utmost simplicity in management systems. They require factual answers to specific questions. They want *better* information not *more* information.

When I see more evidence of a real readiness to listen (and to discuss, and to

*"Chorus: Did you perhaps go further than you have told us?  
Prometheus: I caused mortals to cease foreseeing doom.  
Chorus: What cure did you provide . . . ?  
Prometheus: I placed 'in them blind hopes."*

— Aeschylus

serve) among central purveyors of information I will cease to be as defensive in upholding the importance of a strong and independent farming Press. The inadequacy of our resources of people, money and talent is, I know, patently obvious. To some extent, this is inevitable in a farm industry market that is small by international standards and eroded by a wide array of services provided free by the benign taxpayer. Nevertheless, a Press that is totally accountable to its individual subscribers is at this stage of our farming's evolution of very great importance indeed to anyone who values the principle of freedom.

We must distinguish clearly between information, which is the stuff of personal and institutional power, and communication, which always means relinquishing power and taking risks. Before any of us presumes to declaim in

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more specific terms upon the state of communication in pastoral farming we would do well, I think, to take a long look into (i) ourselves in terms of self-awareness, (ii) ourselves as others see us, (iii) our concerns as others see them and (iv) the concerns of others as they see them. Such an analysis carries a definite risk of insanity and should not be attempted alone! But the conclusions can be as exciting as they are humiliating.

Two thoughts to conclude. The first is from Lao Tzu about 600 BC, the second a paraphrase of the obverse side of a statement attributed to someone else several centuries later:

“He who knows others is wise; he who knows himself is enlightened.” (10)  
“That which does not set people free is not truth.” (11)

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