Is Anybody Really Listening?

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It is a privilege for me to take part in this 37th session of the oldest Road School in the country. It's success and the fact that it has been so widely copied is a genuine tribute to Professor Petty and his associates. In fact, I think Emerson's words, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man" applies most appropriately to Professor Petty and the Purdue Road School.

The change in the title of my talk to "Is Anybody Really Listening" came about for two reasons. First, I took it directly from a FORTUNE Magazine article for reasons that will soon be apparent. Then too, I have been impressed by an illustration a friend of mine uses about listener interest. He says that if you start talking to someone about the hole in your pants he is not much interested. On the other hand, if you start talking about the hole in his pants, he is immediately interested. So I would like to talk with you a few minutes about some of the holes in highway transportation's pants.

Recently we Americans have been smashing records right and left. We can point with pride to new levels of national income, employment, production, motor vehicle ownership and travel mileage. But there's one mark we may break this year that can bring us, individually and collectively, nothing but shame. I refer to the traffic accident record.

Last year we killed 35,000 men, women and children on our highways and streets—3,500 more than in 1949. This past January the traffic death toll was 17 per cent above the corresponding month of 1950, and if this trend continues the year-end harvest will be more than 40,000 fatalities—an all-time record. Unless the people of America bestir themselves and mobilize for safety, as a part of the defense effort, 1951 will go down as the blackest year, thus far, in the history of automotive travel.

The President's Highway Safety Conference, the National Safety Council and safety authorities all over the country repeatedly
have called attention to this dangerous situation . . . trying to arouse people to the urgent need for an intensified safety effort.

But have we achieved any real public understanding, any truly representative public response in terms of cooperative action? Is anybody really listening? In view of the recent traffic-accident record, who can have anything but the gravest doubts?

Actually, apathy and indifference seem to be on the increase. Indeed, we might even say there is a substantial amount of cynicism on the part of both public officials and the general public.

What is wrong? Surely we haven’t reached the stage of callousness where the needless killing of tens of thousands of our citizens and the maiming of a million or more others every year no longer matters. Nor do I think we’re ready to accept the fallacy that traffic accidents are the inevitable price of motor vehicle use. Furthermore, I doubt that the American people knowingly resign themselves to the pernicious effect of traffic accidents on the current defense effort . . . this tremendous drain on our human and economic resources in the face of the overriding need to conserve manpower and materials.

No, the main trouble lies elsewhere. I think we have a very good clue in the search article entitled “Is Anybody Listening?” in the September, 1950, issue of FORTUNE Magazine to which I referred earlier. In that article the author lays bare the reasons why United States business is failing to create real public understanding of the problems and accomplishments of private enterprise. With the greatest selling apparatus in the world, FORTUNE asserts, business has not been successful in communicating these basic ideas to the public.

The article points out that too often business, on its side, has neglected to do enough listening to the people. There has been a lack of adequate two-way communication of ideas—and until this gap is bridged there can be no substantial public understanding of principles and issues.

TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION SYSTEM NEEDS

I am convinced that the same problem exists in highway safety and in all other phases of highway transportation. Thus far we have failed to set up a sound two-way system of communication between officials, safety experts and the general public . . . between the highway engineer, the motor vehicle administrator, the enforcement official, the accident record analyst, the safety educator and
the man in the street. Ostensibly, since highway engineering, enforcement and education depend largely on public funds and public support, the responsible officials are constantly striving for public enlightenment in these matters. Yet much of the time they seem interested in telling their story to those who speak their kind of language.

In virtually every state and city we see these various technicians and traffic experts giving pep talks to each other in their own narrow, select circles. It reminds one of that comic ditty:

"And this is good old Boston,
The home of the bean and the cod
Where the Lowells talk to the Cabots
And the Cabots talk only to God."

With respect to business, the FORTUNE article calls this practice "professional incest"—and it has the same vitiating effect in the traffic safety field as it does in industry and commerce.

In the Federal Government, this practice of talking and writing in a hodge-podge of technical terms has been labelled "gobbledygook". Ways and means to offset this confusion of the public—as well as other officials—by standardizing methods of handling technical information will be discussed in Washington this week.

So I conceive our primary task as twofold: First, we must eliminate the iron curtains to mutual understanding that so often exist between public officials and the great mass of citizens. Second, we must remove such barriers to full interchange of information and joint effort as exist between the various official groups themselves. There is no room for clannishness among the professionals whose common objective is safe and efficient highway transportation. Possibly safety people are more guilty of this fault than anybody else, and least of all do I make any excuses for my own particular group in this request.

The safety authority cannot fulfill this job without knowing something of the problems of the highway engineer and the police official. The motor vehicle administrator cannot do effective work unless he is familiar with the problems of the school administrator and the traffic court judge. There must be a continual exchange of ideas, consultation and cooperation between all these elements.

Never was there a greater need to break down these barriers. Never was it more urgent to tap the great reservoir of civic interest and thereby develop the potentially unlimited power of informed public opinion.
I go so far as to say that we will have little further progress in traffic accident reduction unless, and until, we achieve that end result, with public officials working together for traffic safety like a good football team, and the entire walking and driving public backing them up like a partisan football crowd.

That’s why the Action Program of the President’s Highway Safety Conference recommends in every state and in every city a coordinating committee of officials and a public support group. We are embarked now on a huge defense effort which is closely linked with—and absolutely dependent upon—highway transportation. President Truman emphasized this in his budget message when he said: “Our transportation and communication systems, already handling a high level of traffic, must be prepared for even greater loads that would result from the full impact of mobilization”.

This points up the need to hold in service all roads and vehicles essential for military requirements and the civilian economy. It also underscores the necessity for curtailing accidents, congestion and other traffic inefficiencies. The mounting accident toll, in fact, has caused such concern that the White House has directed the President’s Highway Safety Conference to reconvene in June. Clearly, the nationwide Action Program to conserve life, limb, vehicles and facilities is recognized as an integral part of defense.

Highway officials, and particularly highway engineers, are faced with a formidable responsibility. Large mileages of main roads and streets in every state are seriously impaired and structurally obsolete—unfit and unsafe for current traffic requirements. In certain quarters there is a tendency to ascribe these conditions to engineering failure. “Billions of dollars have been spent on the highway plant,” shout some of the critics. “Then why all these eternal traffic jams, these accidents, delays and frustrations?”

This is but one of the countless misconceptions due to lack of public enlightenment—the lack of adequate two-way communication between the road builder and the road user. Actually our present highway plight testifies to the overwhelming success of the engineers, not their failure. Within the space of about three decades, they accomplished the almost superhuman feat of extending our mileage of surfaced roads from a few thousand miles to a million and a half. This engineering conquest of sheer distances paved the way for the full flowering of the automobile. How else could the motor vehicle ever have become the great instrumentality of economic and social progress that it is?
Of course most of the existing highway network was never designed to carry the gigantic volumes of traffic that are now swamping our roads and streets. Who could have foreseen, for instance, that in the 1939-1950 period alone, vehicular traffic would increase 50 per cent? When those large mileages of highways were improved in those earlier years, who could have anticipated the spectacular increase in trucks or today’s immensely complex traffic patterns?

Some public officials—some engineers—may not yet have recognized the problem created for them by lack of public information about their work. Some haven’t either recognized or accepted their share of the job of keeping the public well informed.

The engineer may deplore the fact that highway matters need popularizing. We may feel that his is a highly technical specialty beyond the comprehension of the layman, and that the public should take his work on faith.

I realize fully that there are national and state laws to prohibit the employment of “propaganda departments.” I realize that in public service as in industry the best public relations consists of building the best possible product in the public interest.

But I maintain that too many professional people, whether engineers, or police, or judges, or teachers take the attitude that it’s so because I say it’s so. Public confidence in public officials has been shaken too often for that attitude to be readily conceded to highway or safety authorities or industrial executives. I am sure the public is hungry for usable and useful information about what is next in importance to food and shelter to them (and sometimes first)—their individual transportation.

Just by way of illustration, let me mention that in the city of Detroit last year more than 63,000 people voluntarily attended driver schools at police precinct stations, in a program initiated during the year by a public-spirited citizen.

You, as engineers, can and are making the most permanent contributions to traffic safety. “Built-in” traffic safety design features, conforming to public understanding and use, serve indefinitely with little further expense, contrasted to continuing enforcement and education expenditures.

Since we must continue in service so many hundreds of thousands of miles of obsolete roads, why can’t those roads be at least center-laned and speed-zoned—by engineers? Is it any wonder that we have so much speed violation when a blanket limit is established for every type of road—old or new? Actually today, the average driver establishes his own speed limit according to what he thinks is proper
within the conditions as he knows them. Might we not have a lot more effective observance of speed regulations and of all other driving rules if the public at large were invited to bring their opinion to bear and if we established those rules by majority vote, modified only by qualified expert technical advice?

The ideal road, of course, would be one which after completion required no traffic control devices except directional signs. But if these devices are needed to compensate for shortcomings in design, they should at least convey the meaning the engineer intends to convey. And the engineers should get together on the symbols they want to use. For instance, why befuddle the public with the 17 different types of center-lane markings in use throughout the country today?

SELLING TRAFFIC SAFETY TO THE PUBLIC

After all, the techniques of road improvement are not an end in themselves—the object is to produce safe and efficient transportation service. That's all the public is interested in.

This point was the central theme of a recent article in TRAFFIC ENGINEERING Magazine, which admonished members of that branch of engineering as follows: “If you have nothing to sell the public but Stop signs, No Parking, Slow, Caution, Careful, you're in bad shape. Nobody wants to be restricted . . . Traffic engineers have one important commodity to sell that 99 per cent of Americans do know they want—safe, convenient and economical transportation of people and goods.”

I am certain that all of us take too much for granted that the public is familiar with even elementary highway facts. We take too much for granted that people really know of the accident hazards in poor driving and careless walking. The public is entitled to a complete and candid picture of the highway situation. They have a right to know what road improvements are needed and why, and the benefits that may be anticipated from those improvements. They have a right to know how much highway money is available, how it is being spent, and whether or not the road user taxes they pay are all going toward the betterment of essential roads.

In one state a lot of misunderstanding between the highway department and the public was cleared up by an outside audit, revealing that the trouble was due to different interpretations of the department’s bookkeeping system!
In another state a nasty situation on enforcing seasonal load limitations on trucks was adjusted when highway department engineers attended a state trucking association meeting to explain why such limitations were necessary. In addition, the highway department and the association worked out an information schedule so the truckers weren’t caught by the sudden application of load limitations after vehicles had been dispatched.

I know of a case where the tops were skinned off several trucking rigs one night because no signs had been posted to warn that about three inches of new surfacing had been poured onto the underpass roadway during the day. Since then, the state trucking association has developed a procedure for drivers to mail in cards reporting on hazards that should be corrected.

Again, the public is entitled to know what traffic control measures it should pay for; why specific laws and ordinances are enacted; and why they must be obeyed. As the late Raymond Clapper, noted Washington correspondent, once observed: “We often overestimate the stock of information people have, and underestimate their intelligence.”

You and I know that the road dollar today goes only about half as far as the pre-war dollar—but does the general public? Have we made any effective effort to tell the taxpayer what the highway authorities are up against in trying to keep abreast of staggering road deficiencies with inflated dollars?

The average motorist now pays about $860 a year for the operation and upkeep of his vehicle. Undoubtedly he would be amazed to learn how little of that amount goes to support the road—without which, of course, his vehicle would be utterly useless. Figures recently compiled by the Institute of Transportation and Traffic Engineering, University of California, show that in that state, 93 cents of every dollar of the motorist’s transportation bill are spent for the car and only seven cents are contributed to road revenue.

Moreover, the average passenger car is used only about 500 hours a year. The road, on the other hand, must provide uninterrupted service night and day, 365 days a year. This is another simple object lesson which has not been sufficiently imparted to the public.

AMAZING COSTS OF TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

Then there is the almost incredible fact that the nation is paying more annually for traffic accidents than for new streets and road construction. The monetary equivalent of last year’s traffic deaths,
injuries and property damage was over three billion dollars. Add to that the huge economic losses due to congestion and other traffic inefficiencies. Delays and the resultant increases in vehicle operating expenses probably cost the public even more than accidents.

Certainly facts like these offer highway and traffic and safety officials a golden opportunity to enlist broader public support for road improvements, since inadequate or defective highways are breeders of accidents. Too many of our major roads are piling up appalling traffic-death records. Take, for instance, the Baltimore Pike between Baltimore and Washington. This 39-mile stretch of 4-lane undivided roadway has averaged about one traffic fatality per mile a year.

Applying the National Safety Council estimate of $65,000 average for each such death (including the pro rata share of injury and property damage accidents), we find that the crashes on that section of road the past 10 years have cost almost three-quarters of a million dollars a mile.

We urgently need more studies of accident experience on all our Baltimore Pikes—on all of our high accident frequency roads. We need to relate that accident experience to deficiencies in design and maintenance, to all the circumstances of occurrence and to the economic losses involved.

It is true that accident reports are used to some extent as a basis for engineering treatment of hazardous locations on existing roadways. But little real progress has been made in developing accident statistics which can be used by the engineer when he is designing a new highway. The design engineer still does not have available what might be called a slide rule of accident experience to determine the efficiency or inefficiency of proposed design standards.

Even in normal times we cannot afford the accident drain on our human and material resources. In a time of national emergency like the present, these needless losses are intolerable. We expect casualties on the warfront, much as we may deplore them. But there is little excuse for the traffic carnage on the homefront, since from 85 per cent to 90 per cent of all motor vehicles accidents could be prevented.

Yet, even while we mobilize for what may be a fight for survival, we permit traffic accidents to sap our strength and hamper the defense effort. In this connection, let's take a closer look at last year's traffic toll. Of the 35,000 fatalities, about 21,000 were persons of military or productive age. These deaths represented the loss of 485,000 man-years of productive work or military service. Included
in the million and a quarter injured were more than 100,000 persons permanently disabled and their productivity reduced or totally lost.

Then consider the waste of materials. There are more than nine million motor vehicle accidents annually. About two million of these result in property damage in excess of $25. Virtually all of them require some repair or replacement work.

But that's not all. These traffic accidents are placing a heavy burden on our limited medical and hospital facilities and our blood plasma banks. Moreover, in addition to skilled production workers, traffic deaths are robbing us of many doctors and nurses, and even reach into the ranks of the military forces. Recently, the commander of the jet pilot training center at Selfridge Field, Michigan, became alarmed at the increasing number of traffic injuries and deaths among his personnel that he instituted a rigorous traffic safety program of his own. Within five months, he reduced traffic accidents at his base nearly 50 per cent.

From the highway engineering standpoint, the maximum possible contribution to safety would be to build into every road and street all the proven safety features applicable to its type or class. Modern engineering has developed highways that have only a fraction of the accident rate of older roads handling comparable traffic volume.

We have striking examples in the records of high-type, controlled access facilities like the Merritt and Wilbur Cross Parkways in Connecticut, the Metropolitan New York Parkway System, the Pentagon Network in the Washington Metropolitan area and the Arroyo Seco in California. For example, the rate on the Pentagon Network for the years 1942-48 averaged only 1.5 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles, while the national rate for the period averaged over 10 deaths.

Obviously, reconstructing our entire road and street plant to desirable safety standards cannot be accomplished overnight. The present world crisis may be of long duration and manpower and material requirements for defense will have a further retarding effect on our highway progress.

It is a short-sighted view that would curtail all construction and limit essential maintenance in this time of national peril. The highways are productive facilities. They produce transportation vital to the nation's defense and economy, and as such cannot be divorced from the emergency effort. Like an industrial plant or any other productive facility, they cannot render safe and efficient service if allowed to run down.
What we do need for the safety and efficiency of streets and highways, as in every other phase of the defense effort, is a priority schedule—a special emphasis program for roads and streets of prime importance to the national welfare. Commissioner MacDonald has recommended that the states undertake prompt studies to determine which arteries can be held in service without major improvements over a 10-year period, and which will require reconstruction. The State of Virginia has led the way in this special type of engineering study, with the cooperation of the Automotive Safety Foundation, the Bureau of Public Roads and the Department of Defense.

Such a study, with the findings reported to the public clearly, concisely and forthrightly, can serve not only in Virginia, but equally well in every other state as an important first step toward enlisting widespread interest and support for the road program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As I suggested earlier, many of the obstacles now encountered by highway and safety and other traffic officials could be eliminated by taking the public into their confidence. The way to generate popular interest in our highway and safety activities and problems is through positive action to foster mutual understanding.

For what they're worth, here are some other ways to improve two-way communication:

1. Exert every effort to make your state traffic safety official coordinating committee an effective working agency. Fortunately, a move in your legislature to abolish this committee in the name of "false" economy was defeated.

2. Enlist the aid of your state safety council as a public information and support agency.

3. Develop understandable, clear and frequent statements of official acts to increase the safety and efficiency of Indiana's highway transportation system.

This means that dry statistics must be brought to life with compelling words and pictures. It means you must utilize every possible medium to bring your departments into closer contact with the people—newspapers, magazines, radio, television, motion pictures, exhibits and demonstrations.

4. Hold road-building clinics to enlighten citizens on the costs and efforts that go into the construction of a modern road. Isn't it feasible to take high school classes, women's groups, service club
members and others out to a road project and afford them first-hand information about your work? The same sort of field trips might be arranged to demonstrate road hazards and what is being done to eliminate them. What better way to build good will on the part of the taxpayer? What better way to develop a militant and informed public support for your highway program?

Such steps as these, it seems to me, are the fundamentals in setting up an adequate two-way communication system between highway and traffic officials, and the public. These are the procedures to insure intelligent listening—and understanding—by the people who foot America's highway bill.

Winning public support will not only insure that the needed highway job will get done, but that the program will be taken out of the realm of personal opinion or political pressure and put on a sound engineering basis. That is the only way we can insure safe, convenient and economical transportation in the years ahead.