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“Poetry and the Police”

Robert Darnton’s “Poetry and the Police” analyzes the various complex communication networks in Paris during the 18th century. Darnton notes that communication plays a significant role in every society, especially when most people are semiliterate. This book proves that oral messages played one of the most significant roles in the way news traveled. “It reveals the way an information society operated when information spread by word of mouth and poetry carried messages among ordinary people, very effectively and long before the internet” (Darnton, 145).

Darnton first exemplifies the impact of oral communication by analyzing the “Affair of the Fourteen.” King Louis XV, the reigning French monarch for most of the 18th century, used spies and police to monitor what rumors his people spread about him. In 1749, a Parisian lieutenant general of police found a poem beginning with the phrase “Monster whose black fury.” Since “monster” referred to King Louis XV, the king sent spies to uncover the poem’s author. The investigation led to the arrest of 14 middle-class men, all of whom had heard the poem, altered it, copied it down and passed it along to multiple other people. The police eventually ceased trying to discover every person who held a copy of the poem; the communication network had branched too far.

Furthermore, the book analyzes the power of other oral communication networks, such as song and music. The French often took music from old songs and altered the lyrics to discuss current events. Music offered an easier way of remembering songs and passing them along, especially to many illiterate Parisians. “The art of memory was a powerful force in the communication system. But the most effective mnemonic device was music” (Darnton, 4). Many commoners became street singers and used their songs to spread satire and messages to a large crowd. In addition to the most current events, these messages also vented Parisians’ frustrations,

which included the high tax during peacetime, the King's excessive expenses for his mistress Madame de Pompadour, the expulsion of the comte de Maurepas and the cruel banishment of the beloved Prince Edouard. Songs played a substantial role in spreading news since they traveled up and down the social chain into various classes. They held such importance that some Frenchmen wrote down every song they heard in a special journal called a "Chansonnier." These journals illustrate the impact that oral communication had on every society. After many of these songs reached King Louis XV, he changed the way he ruled because he believed his people hated him. This exhibits the power of public opinion through oral communication, a force that Darnton describes as strong and "palpable" (Darnton, 128).

In "The natural history of the news: An epigenetic study," written by John Hamilton and Heidi Tworek, the authors demonstrate the importance of communication networks by analyzing the Anglo-American model of news, which states that journalism and news are interchangeable. The authors argue that although the two are connected, they cannot be the same since news has existed for much longer than journalism. Before newspapers existed, people used oral communication via jokes, songs, poems and rumors as a way to spread and understand news. "People have always cared about the news," Hamilton and Tworek write. "They have just found different modes to gather and consume news" (Hamilton and Tworek, 402).

Whether society uses oral communication to discover the daily news or pass along satire, one thing is clear: oral communication has always played a vital role in society. Every civilization finds different ways to pass along news; 18th century Parisians used poems while today's society uses social media. Communication plays a key role in altering a community's public opinion, thus affecting the way a government can operate. Although tracing oral communication can be difficult, Darnton proves that it is not only possible, but also imperative to understanding the role of news and public opinion in each society.