

Communication in Crisis.

The “Red Phone” and the “Hotline”

Tobias Nanz

Abstract:

In situations of crisis politicians are expected to keep calm and to de-escalate the state of affairs. In this paper I will discuss two devices for crisis communication with regard to form and behaviour: First, the legendary “Red Phone” as a direct communication link between Washington and Moscow, which allows the president to present himself as a capable leader with a cool mind, who can pick up the “Red Phone” and convince a political opponent in a crisis. Second, the “Hotline” as a highly formalised telex connection between both capitals, which enables the political leaders of the US and the USSR to communicate quickly and reliably but without capitalising on the abilities of the president as a cool-headed negotiator. The aim of this analysis is to discuss how both devices were presented to the public and used by the politicians and how this may impact on national and international politics.

Keywords: media history; diplomacy; hotline; red phone; communication in crisis

Tobias Nanz, Postdoc in the Research Training Group “Transnational Media Events from Early Modern Times to the Present” at Justus-Liebig-University Gießen; from 2001 to 2009 teaching and research assistant at the faculty of media at Bauhaus-University Weimar; 2004/05 Junior Fellowship of the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna; 2008 PhD on the media history of Diplomacy: *Grenzverkehr. Eine Mediengeschichte der Diplomatie*, Zürich/Berlin: Diaphanes 2010.

E-Mail: tobias.nanz@gkm.uni-giessen.de



In 1984 Walter Mondale, the former democratic vice-president under Jimmy Carter, ran against the incumbent President Ronald Reagan in the US presidential election. [1] A year earlier President Reagan had launched the Strategic Defense Initiative, also known as the Star Wars programme, a satellite-based laser defence system intended to offer protection from Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles. On 26 October 1984, five days after the second public presidential debate, US cinemas started screening James Cameron's movie *Terminator*, starring a future politician: Arnold Schwarzenegger played a cybernetic organism and soldier fighting against resisting humans. Machines had taken command over the superpowers' arsenals, had destroyed human culture and now ruled the world. This fictional hot war of the machines reminded viewers of the danger of a nuclear war between the US and the USSR.

In 1984 politics and fiction interacted. On the one hand, Reagan's Star Wars programme increased the fear of a nuclear war, on the other hand, several novels and movies described scenarios of a nuclear crisis or scenarios of technical problems threatening to trigger an accidental war. Based on these scenarios, my paper focuses on two modes of diplomacy used by human and technical agents (Latour 2005, 63-86) and it investigates differences in form and behaviour. In the first part of my paper, I will discuss the "Red Phone", a well-known but mythical direct communication link between the White House or Pentagon in Washington and the Kremlin in Moscow. Based on two Democratic Party election campaign commercials from 1984, I want to analyse the functioning of this communication device in a potential political crisis in times of a nuclear threat. Both commercials, even though fictional, are part of a discourse that takes place in a society living in a state of high alert, on the one hand, and, on the other, discusses the president's competence in a crisis. In the second part I will examine the "Hotline", a highly formalised communication link between both superpowers, which was installed after the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 to prevent a nuclear war being triggered by a political or military misunderstanding. "Media determine our situation" (Kittler 1999, xxxix), whether politicians use a telephone or a telex system to solve a crisis. The aim of this analysis is to discuss how both devices were presented to the public and used by politicians and how this may impact on national and international politics.

The "Red Phone"

Making a telephone call is an everyday practice that replaces a type of proximity between the dialogue partners. In this paper the "Red Phone" can be considered as a device that facilitates an

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informal channel of communication. It should help to solve a crisis immediately by avoiding the rituals of formalised politics with its ceremonial communication that in former times was often criticised as “tiresome”, “artificial” and a “hindrance” (Roosen 1980, 453).

The first commercial in the Mondale campaign shows a peculiar version of a standard US phone without a dial. A single lamp blinks continuously, indicating it is on stand-by mode. A voice from off reminds us of the significance of this phone and the characteristics of the person who is to answer the call [Fig. 1]:

“The most awesome, powerful responsibility in the world lies in the hand that picks up this phone. The idea of an unsure, unsteady, untested hand is something to really think about. This is the issue of our times. On March 20, vote as if the future of the world is at stake.

Mondale: this president will know what he is doing, and that’s the difference between Gary Hart [his Democratic rival in the primaries] and Walter Mondale.”

Usually, the caller has a lot of options when dialling a number. One can call a family member, a friend or some random person in Australia. A dial or keypad with numbers from one to nine offers a lot of options that the “Red Phone” shown in the Mondale spot does not provide. The president of the United States has no choice: the “Red Phone” in the War Room can only be used for crisis communication with the Soviet leader. The missing dial and the blinking lamp imply that both countries are continuously on alert and that there is only one way to solve a crisis. The president cannot avoid this task. Thus, according to the commercial, the person who answers the call should not have “an unsure, unsteady, untested hand.”

The emphasis on the hand as an indicator of personality has a long history. Since the 17th century a person’s handwriting has been believed to reveal her or his character, desires and deepest secrets. In the late 18th century handwriting was considered a mirror of the soul and subsequently became the scientific object of psychology and psychiatry. The analysis of handwriting was, for example, undertaken to obtain information on illnesses and dysfunctions of the brain. Researchers measured reaction times, examined hand movements and gathered a lot of data, hoping to determine whether a subject suffered from delusion or mental disorder or to discover their unique characteristics (Schäfer 2005, 241-242). The philosopher Martin Heidegger emphasised the functioning of the hand: it sets the human being apart from other animals as it enables a person to indicate or demonstrate something;



[Fig. 1] The ‘Red Phone’

furthermore, a human being writes and therefore thinks with his or her hand. Based on this consideration Heidegger fears typewriting, which replaced handwriting in business affairs at the end of the 19th century: in contrast to handwriting, the idiosyncratic characteristics of the author remain hidden when using the typewriter (Heidegger 1982, 118-119.).

However, according to this political commercial, the hand as the guarantee of a person's qualification changes the setting. In the 20th century, men of power distinguish themselves by sitting at their desks to pick up the phone – not to write (Flusser 2002, 125). They have to express their strength of purpose by answering a call and discussing with an opponent. The supreme commander of the armed forces must not suffer from mental disorder but has to prove himself as a leader with strength of purpose. Walter Mondale is shown to possess the necessary skills to answer the “Red Phone”.

The second commercial shows part of the situation room. This time, the “Red Phone” has four rhythmically blinking keys but still does not seem to have the same calling options that we know from a usual phone. A voice from off warns about the absence of the president potentially causing a nuclear war between the superpowers **[Fig. 2]:**

“Ronald Reagan is determined to put killer weapons in space. The Soviets will have to match us and the arms race will range out of control. Orbiting. Aiming. Waiting. With a response-time to fire so short, there will be no time to wake a president. Computers will take control.

On November 6 you can take control. No weapons in space by either side. Draw the line at the heavens. With Mondale.”

An automated chain of command operating without human beings may be a consequence of Reagan's Star Wars programme. The leaders have no time for consideration and inquiries once nuclear weapons are in space. Machines could be at war while reason is asleep. “There will be no time to wake a president,” the voice from off tells us. Who is calling? The Soviet chairman? Is there a misunderstanding? Or are computers communicating among themselves? In any case, computers seem to search for target areas shortly after the end of the phone negotiation. Human diplomacy comes to its end. Peace and war – 0 or 1 – will be negotiated by computer protocols.

This is a departure from diplomatic ceremonial, from the procedures, traditions, rights and hopes that governed the behaviour of diplomats when they were performing official functions with one



[Fig. 2:] The ‘Red Phone’ in the Situation Room

another. The set of rules provided by behaviour guides and laws as well as the redundant ceremonies are traded in for a non-redundant computer protocol.

And this is the horror-scenario of 1984. But there is still a spark of hope that the human agents, that is, the political leaders, will be able to solve problems over the phone. This medium offers a lot of advantages for a businesslike conversation. According to Franziska Baumgarten, who published a *Psychologie des Telephonierens* in 1931, it is easier to call an unpleasant person than to meet her or him face-to-face.

“Das Telephon verbindet nicht nur als technisches Mittel die Menschen, sondern als Möglichkeit, das uns Störende an ihnen im gegebenen Moment zu verdecken und die sachlichen Beziehungen mit für uns nützlichen, aber sonst uns unsympathischen Menschen aufrechtzuerhalten.” [2] (Baumgarten 1989, 189)

Using a phone means being freed from the necessity of simulating and dissimulating, both very important techniques for baroque-era courtiers and diplomats. At least, visual affectation is no longer necessary. While one may be saucer-eyed because of bad news, simultaneously the absence of mutual visibility means one can pretend to be calm and talk politely.

Nevertheless, Baumgarten continues, “there is a flip-side to the coin.” This “blind conversation” provokes an abandoning of affective connectedness due to the absence of gestures and gazes, the absence of all kinds of non-verbal communication (Baumgarten 1989, 188f.). So the telephone may encourage rudeness and lies. In addition, the caller exerts a dominating influence over the respondent – and this should be the biggest problem for political leaders: according to his schedule, the caller asks the receiver to answer the phone and exercises control at the other end of the line. Baumgarten therefore concludes that powerful people need a secretary who can ward off unwanted callers (Baumgarten 1989, 195).

Robert McNamara, the former Secretary of Defense, gives an example of such a control situation in his autobiography. He reports on the first official activation of the “Hotline” between Moscow and Washington during the six-day-war in June 1967.

“On June 5, as usual, I arrived at the Pentagon at 7:00 a.m. Within an hour, my phone rang and a voice said, ‘This is General *Smith* in the War Room.’ [...]”

[2] Translation: “The telephone is not only a device that connects people but also a possibility to hide a person’s annoying characteristics during a call, so that one can stay in a businesslike contact with an unfriendly but useful person.”

The general said, 'Premier Kosygin is on the 'hotline' and asks to speak to the president. What should I tell him?'

'Why are you calling me?' I said.

'Because the 'hot line' ends in the Pentagon,' he replied. [...]

I told the general, 'Patch the circuit over to the White House Situation Room, and I'll call the president.'

I knew President Johnson would be asleep, but I put through the call. As I expected, a sergeant posted outside the president's bedroom answered the phone. [...]

'The president is asleep and doesn't like to be awakened,' he remarked.

'I know that, but wake him up.' [...]

'What in the hell are you calling me for at this hour of the morning?' [the president] growled sleepily.

'Mr. President, the 'hot line' is up and Kosygin wants to speak to you. What should we say?'

'My God, what *should* we say?' he replied.

'I suggest I tell him you will be in the Situation Room in fifteen minutes.' [...]" (McNamara 1995, 278-279)

The president, unkindly woken, has a 15-minute time slot to devise a plan with his staff to defuse the war between Israel and its Arab neighbours in order to prevent a conflict or war between the USSR and US. He has to get up, dress and collect himself. At the peak of the crisis Kosygin even threatened war.

What had happened? Is Franziska Baumgarten right at assuming that using the telephone supports rudeness and raises conflicts? Furthermore, what language did the Soviet chairman use? Russian, French or English? Was there a misunderstanding? Did the interpreter make a mistake? Does McNamara misremember the situation?

No, he does not. He knows that the "Hotline" has never been a telephone, red or otherwise, and it has never sat on the president's desk. In his autobiography, we find some references to the "Teletype circuits" (McNamara 1995, 279) in the Pentagon. But for the dramaturgy of his autobiography it seems to be more thrilling to suggest that there was a telephone link between both parties, as described in novels such as *Fail Safe* (Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, 1962) or movies like the one based on this novel (Sidney Lumet, 1964) and *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964). Formulations like "Kosygin wants to speak to you" or "What should we say?" suggest an oral communication and therefore fits the prototypical crisis plot that consists of threat, time, and surprise: "a situation is said

to be a crisis if [...] it (1) threatens one or more goals of a state [...] (2) allows only a short time for decision [...] and (3) occurs as a surprise to the policy makers” (Hermann 1972, 187). The phone is a device that demands an immediate answer, so there is no time to devise an elaborate response. As a result of its aptness to emphasise the time pressure inherent in a crisis, the fictional object of the “Red Phone” became a discursive fact in politics and society. It was suitable for a political leader to help him distinguish himself as a strong, self-conscious and cool-headed politician.

The “Hotline”

The “Direct Communications Link”, also known as “Hotline”, is a by-product of the Cuban missile crisis. A direct wire was set up with telexes in Moscow and in Washington and, in case of disruption, supplemented by a radio-telegraph circuit. Both states, the US and USSR, reached a “Hotline” agreement. As stated in the introduction to the “Memorandum of Understanding”,

“The need for ensuring quick and reliable communication directly between the heads of government of nuclear-weapons states first emerged in the context of efforts to reduce the danger that accident, miscalculation, or surprise attack might trigger a nuclear war.” (Memorandum 1963)

The wire was installed “for use in time of emergency” and – as stated by the Soviet foreign minister, Gromyko, in 1969 – was a consequence of the fact

“that weapons control and guidance systems are becoming [...] more and more independent of the people who create them. Human hearing and vision are not capable of reacting accurately at today’s velocities and the human brain is sometimes unable to evaluate the readings of a multitude of instruments quickly enough. The decision made by a human being ultimately depends on the conclusions provided to him by computer devices.” (Smith 1980, 280)

Based on this independence of the weapons control systems from individual control, the “Hotline” was intended to overcome public fear that a nuclear war might be caused either by a misunderstanding or by an automated chain of command. In a time of crisis the political leaders should have the ability to communicate directly with each other. Messages from Moscow were transmitted in Russian using the Cyrillic alphabet, and messages from Washington were transmitted in English, using the Latin

alphabet, and were subsequently translated at either end. To this end, the US and the USSR exchanged equipment to permit the correct printing in both languages (Memorandum 1963). Thus each government could use its own language, so that the sovereignty of both countries was guaranteed. This procedure adheres to the legal tradition of modern diplomacy, that every diplomat negotiates in his or her own language (Moser 1750, 8). Both governments exchanged automatic ambassadors, formerly known as human *Ambassadeurs Extraordinaires*, which even managed to infiltrate the opponent's situation room. The terminals became the leaders' private ambassadors. For instance, in disarmament negotiations Jimmy Carter used the "Hotline" to bypass the Department of State and to identify himself as the president (Berridge 2005, 98).

The staff assigned to the United States terminal included an officer in charge of operations, five translator-team chiefs and ten communication specialists. Two operators were on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The cable and radio circuits were tested hourly by transmitting test messages. A team with little interest in poetics used the standard test message: "THE QUICK BROWN FOX [JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG 1234567890]" (Anonymous, s.a., 4), a pangram, that is, a sentence using every letter of the alphabet at least once. A more ambitious team might have transmitted brief literary and textual extracts, for instance selections from Shakespeare. Russian teams preferred to transmit brief reports of the sunset in Moscow. It was of course crucial that all test messages were free of political content.

But all the artistic efforts cannot hide the fact that the messages were extracted from a noisy channel. The hourly test messages ensured the operational reliability of the terminals as well as the adequate signal-to-noise ratio. This procedure was to guarantee that the messages were free of mistakable semantics that could be composed by the "Hotline" staff. Furthermore, as long as the terminals sent and printed the standard test message, authorship and authenticity were not questioned: it was completely clear that the operators checked the telex system according to the agreement between both countries.

But authorship and authenticity as well as the concept of an author as creative writer were queried when Claude Shannon, the founder of information theory, did his experiments on approaching the English language by mathematical methods. In his theory of communication, first published in 1948, he was interested in telex and telegraphy, because these devices are "two simple examples of a discrete channel for transmitting information. Generally, a discrete channel will mean a system whereby a sequence of choices from a finite set of elementary symbols" – for instance the 26 letters of the Latin

alphabet plus the space – “can be transmitted from one point to another.” (Shannon 1963, 36) In his theory, Shannon considered the information source, figured out how it can be described mathematically, and applied his information theory to natural language processing. Thus he computed different series of approximations to English and transformed a jumbled mess of letters into words or parts of a sentence.

For instance, a zero-order approximation is obtained by choosing all letters with the same probability and independently: “XFOML RXKHRJFFJUJ ZLPWCFWKCYJ FFJEYVKCQSGHYD QPAAMKBZAACIBZLHJQD” (Shannon 1963, 43). Shannon discusses some further approximations with which the “resemblance to ordinary English text increases quite noticeably at each of the [...] steps.” (Shannon 1963, 42) So in the first-order approximation each letter has the same probability of appearance that it has in the natural language; or, like the second-order word approximation, according to which each word is chosen with probabilities that depend on the preceding word:

“THE HEAD AND IN FRONTAL ATTACK ON AN ENGLISH WRITER THAT THE CHARACTER OF THIS POINT IS THEREFORE ANOTHER METHOD FOR THE LETTERS THAT THE TIME OF WHO EVER TOLD THE PROBLEM FOR AN UNEXPECTED” (Shannon 1963, 44).

In the last sequence, “four or more words can easily be placed in sentences without unusual or strained constructions.” (Shannon 1963, 44) Furthermore, the “FRONTAL ATTACK ON AN ENGLISH WRITER” illustrates that a computer is able to write just as well as a human author. In other words, the concept of an author as a creative writer is questioned when mathematics and computers are able to extract information from a noisy background (Kittler 1988, 346-347, 355) – although they might not produce meaningful texts. But Shannon’s series of approximations to English are not only a frontal attack on an English writer, but also on a president who uses the telex for crisis communication. Since the development of these approximations, the problem of authenticity and authentication arose. Did the president really answer the message? Was it a soldier? Or did machines communicate among themselves? Certainly, as long as technical devices cannot compute semantics and as long as telex terminals are not connected to weapons, the political body of the president will not be threatened while exercising his office.

In closing, I want to highlight central aspects of my argumentation regarding communication in a crisis situation. First, why is the “Red Phone” perceived as the self-evident choice of communication medium for diplomatic exchange in popular culture and why do politicians use this fiction for their self-representation? The fiction is so important because it protects the political body of the president and presents the leader of a country as a person with whom people can identify. In this fiction the president distinguishes himself as a strong leader by behaving like a person with a cool mind, who is able to pick up the “Red Phone” and to convince the political opponent in a crisis. In other words, the president can present himself as the perfect negotiator to lead people in a crisis. In contrast, the “Hotline” is not suitable for an identification reading of “the president” as a person who acts and takes decisions. The “Hotline” is a set-up consisting of terminals, telexes, cables, operators and translators. These technical and human agents operate on formal codes, which are completely different from the fictional but well-known operations of the “Red Phone”. The formal codes of the “Hotline” in normal mode, that is, not in a crisis, were determined by contract between the two superpowers. As long as the “Hotline” transmits test messages, the US and the USSR are living together in peace. But the politicians did not work out a mode of behaviour for a crisis. For instance, the operators of the US terminal did not know how to address Chairman Alexei Kosygin in the first US “Hotline” transmission during the Six-Day War in June 1967. The decision to call the recipient “Comrade Kosygin” (The National Military Command Center 1967) was a rather poor choice, as the US Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson later noted: the Russians wondered if President Lyndon B. Johnson wanted to make fun of Chairman Kosygin. (Davis 1968, 1)

Second, I argued that the “Red Phone” represents an everyday practice suggesting that the control over negotiations is still in the hands of political leaders. Against the background of the Cuban missile crisis the “Red Phone” was deemed a suitable medium of negotiation, promising an informal way of solving a crisis. The politicians got rid of the apparently useless and time-wasting protocol that worried courtiers at the end of the 18th century. Now the political leaders could easily talk to each other by picking up the phone and did not have to discuss where to meet, how to furnish the conference room and so on. Time will not be wasted on formalities. In contrast to the “Red Phone”, the telex is a highly formalised medium: standardised test messages are transmitted at default points in time. But in times when scientists have developed methods for computing language, problems of authentication may arise. The “Hotline” operates according to a technical protocol that produces distance between both parties. Is the president really in the situation room? Kosygin asked (Davis 1968). Is the president

really the author of the message that was transmitted by the “Hotline”? No handwriting can prove this, as the messages were encoded and sent fragmented in Morse code from Washington to Moscow.

Thus, while the “Red Phone” stands for an everyday practice and closeness between the negotiators, the “Hotline” maintains a distance, confuses the users concerning formal regulations (how to address the respondent) and is based on a technical system that only the well-trained staff can handle. Communication in a crisis is not based on an informal call that could solve a problem by telling the respondent “how do you think I feel about it?” (Muffley) as shown satirically in *Dr. Strangelove*, with President Muffley’s call to Premier Kissoff. When the real President Johnson describes the “Hotline” as a device that allows the user to send “Here is how we feel about it” (Johnson 1967, 6) during a press conference on the occasion of the Six-Day War in June 1967, he is popularising the operation of the “Hotline”. But his statement referring to the everyday practice of calling is clearly a simplification for the public. Actually, there was not a single cable that included any discussion of feelings; all cables were formulated unemotionally and followed a specific strategy. Showing emotions does not seem to be the appropriate behaviour in a crisis.

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