

Richard Katula: The Art of Political Communication interview by Victor Tsilonis

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Abstract: The professor of Communication Studies in the University of Northeastern, Richard Katula presents significant features of the art of political communication by referring to events of the United States political history. He also talks about the differences between Greek and United States academic community, the movement of Greek Renaissance, the role of religion in politics and the television rules of political communication.

Richard Katula, a professor of Communication Studies at the Northeastern University of United States, who had been granted a Fulbright scholarship in the past, visited Thessaloniki for a few days at mid July of 2006. Despite his limited time, he kindly accepted our proposal for an interview during which we covered more subjects than I expected.

The interview does not merely highlight important aspects of the modern political communication, but also many of the reasons why United States admire Greek civilisation. Nevertheless, this fact should neither be misinterpreted, nor render us arrogant, since we frequently adopt many elements of the United States culture, **although** we frequently utilise the derogative term “United States stuff” in our everyday language. To sum up, “we may have given them the lights of civilisation but they gave us back electricity”.

V- I would like to thank you for accepting our proposal to give an interview for Intellectum journal.

Katula- It is my pleasure.

V- Could you please tell us, Professor Katula, a few words about your career so far?

Katula- I served in the US army from 1968 to 1970 and then completed my studies at University of Illinois in 1974. Consequently, I taught mainly at three Universities: at University of Rhode Island, at DePaul University in Chicago, and at Northeastern

University from 1990 to present. Contemporaneously, I had been chairman of the Communications Department at Northeastern University for 13 years, I have written three books and many articles, and since 2004 I have become a professor. I am not exclusively occupied with solid academic research but mainly with public lectures which I give in various countries such as Greece, United States and elsewhere. I love lecturing very much because it allows me to transmit knowledge and offer it to the audience. In other words, I am trying to accomplish the same aim with your journal.

Greek and American Academic Community in Comparison

V- Apart from the issue of resources, which do you consider as the main differences between the Greek and the American academia?

Katula- I think that American professors have a different philosophy of teaching than the Greeks. This does not necessarily mean that one of them is better than the other, but that there are simply different. I think that in Greece, most professors still utilise the traditional German approach according to which "the professor possesses the knowledge and the students receive it from him." It is like pouring water into a jar. However, in this way professors remain quite distant from their students,

In the United States, education is much more interactive. We, the teachers, are expected to be more interactive because knowledge is something that emerges from dialogue. Hence, the professor is supposed to make an informational introduction on an issue and then initiate a dialogue with the students. In a way, it is quite ironic that in the United States most of us practice the Socratic method, while in Greece they practice the German method!

The Greek Revival Movement and the Quest for the American soul

V- I have also read that you have been honoured with the Everett Lee Hunt award. Can you please tell us a few words about this?

Katula- Yes, I was very fortunate to receive the Everett Lee Hunt award. Everett Lee Hunt was a famous professor at Princeton University who believed that academics should address the public in an easily comprehensible language. I was granted the award because in 2000 I did a documentary on Abraham Lincoln's famous speech in Gettysburg. I created this video because I discovered that while everyone in the United States was aware of Lincoln's speech, very few Americans understood its

significance though. It was exactly via this speech that **Lincoln oriented United States towards the concept of equality and this is the reason why** I argued that Lincoln's speech constitutes the third founding document of the United States, i.e., after the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Since then, our courts and legislators' agenda has been mostly dedicated to the obsessive pursuit of equality (women's rights, minority rights etc.).

V- The rights of black people included?

Katula- Yes, the Afro-American rights as well.

V-But these rights were recognised a little bit late, didn't they?

Katula- It took one hundred years for these rights to be entrenched. In other words, this philosophy was articulated by Lincoln for the first time in 1863, although it was not legally recognised until 1964. Until then there was a quest of America's soul. All these years, intellectuals, politicians and even average Americans had been wondering "whether we can do this, whether we can become like this". This is why I attempted in my documentary to depict this quest of Lincoln's dream.

V- When did Lincoln deliver the Gettysburg speech (the Gettysberg address)?

Katula- Lincoln's speech was delivered on 19th of November 1863, i.e., four months after the Gettysburg battle. This occurred because the principal speaker, Edward Everett, America's first Ph.D. holder and founder of the Greek Revival movement, requested a four-month period to memorise and deliver his speech.

V- What do you mean exactly by saying that Edward Everett was the founder of the Greek Revival movement?

Katula- The Greek Revival movement is one of the most important cultural movements in the American history and commences in 1828. Following the Independence War of 1812 against Britain, our intellectuals and politicians decided that two wars against Britain were enough and that United States should forge its unique identity and wean itself off Great Britain. Edward Everett, rector of Harvard University at that time, visited Greece, walked the fields of Marathon and other historical places and then returned to the United States and proclaimed: "The United States will become Greece." Thus, he demanded every student at Harvard University to study classical ancient Greek history and language and deliver a speech in Greek. In Washington D.C., Boston, New York, the architecture style was Greek! Even the furniture style was Greek and even the clothing was Greek. Women used to wear something that looked like chlamys. Finally, our laws were based upon the Solon's laws.

Public Speeches: From Antiquity to Present

V- To return back to the topic of public speeches, which do you think are the differences and similarities between Greek and American political speech today?

Katula- Public oratory in the United States is based upon the classical Greek oratory: “The Epitaph” of Periklis, Socrate’s “Apologia”, Dimosthenes’ speeches. The way we publicly argue and utilise similes, our ability to memorise texts and stimulate emotions, all these come from Ancient Greece.

As far as the Greek oratory is concerned, my sole experience was in 2004 because I was teaching in Greece. In the United States we would characterise the Greek political speeches as passionate orations. Oration in Greece is more passionate, more powerful and even speaker’s voice more overpowering than in United States. Abraham Lincoln’s speeches, for example, were based on the art of arguing, which riveted the audience, and not on speech’s intensity. Yet, I noticed that in Greece, maybe because of Karamanlis and Papandreou, there has been a Greek passion surrounded by lots of music, slogans and a ‘dog and pony’ show.

V-So, there is no need for passionate speeches in United States?

Katula- Not so much. The American tradition is a little bit more subdued. There are still some people who recall the demagogic era which was dominant in the United States from 1860 until 1930. But since 1930 and afterwards, the American oratory has become quite blunt, less passionate and excessive.

Religion and Politics

V- However, Greek politicians do not speak about God too often in a way that American politicians like George Bush do. And I wonder how is it possible for the leader of a secular state like US to evoke God and Jesus. What is your explanation?

Katula- George Bush derives his electoral power from the far religious right in the United States. If you visit America’s heartland, the ‘Bible belt’, from Pennsylvania to Colorado, from Michigan to Mississippi, you will encounter a very traditional United States where people are deeply religious. Nonetheless, Europeans are not usually aware of this America.

V- Do you think that his image makers played a crucial role towards this direction or it was just a George Bush’s idea?

Katula-No it is true that his image makers played a crucial role. George Bush's principal speech writer, Michael Gerson, is a far-right Christian fundamentalist and the coiner of the 'axes of evil' phrase which exists in all of Bush's speeches next to the 'May God bless the United States' and other similar references. The initial phrase was 'axes of hatred' and was coined by one of Gerson's collaborators, inspired by the speech of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1941 following the Pearl Harbour, in which Roosevelt used the phrase 'forces of axis' to connect Japan's attack with Germany and rage war against Hitler.

V- But can we say that this religious element, which has been imported into the public discourse influence our culture today and how?

Katula- This is a great question. I believe that regarding domestic politics, this infusion of 'Biblical religiosity' has a tremendous effect on issues that Europeans would never think of. The Europeans believe that we are crazy but there are issues which are religiously defined and are consequently comprehended by the public via religious terms, e.g. gay people's marriage, the stem cells research etc. The Bible says no, and **so born-again Christians say "No"** too. On the contrary, people who are secular argue: "Of course, what's the problem?" Hence, it is easy for the public to realise these issues through the division of religion and society life. Religious people believe that stem cell research can be involved in killing human embryos since life, according to them, begins at the moment of conception. So, their answer is still "No." George Bush is not directly against stem-cell research but he is opposed against using the tax payers' money to support the funding of any embryonic stem-cell research. The secular people disagree, because in this way we can cure Parkinson and other serious diseases. Moreover, I could also name four or five other issues that in a Democracy, when you address them to three hundred million people and look for clear ways of dividing the opposed opinions, religion often becomes the clearest and simplest way of understanding these issues.

Political Communication, Authenticity and Visual Queues

V-Ok. Eventually a speech of a politician today reflects himself or constitutes a product of his group of collaborators?

Katula- The procedure is complicated. For instance, last year approximately 35 people collaborated for Bush's speech to the nation. Bush firstly asked the Council of Ministers what they thought that should be included in his speech and asked them to

send their ideas to his speech writer Gerson. Ministers like Kontoliza Rais, Rumsfeld and other high-rank officials did not send simple suggestions but whole drafts. So initially approximately 35 people suggested ideas and propositions. Then, Gerson and the staff in charge met Bush and discussed about the goals of the speech. Following, they wrote a whole draft which was sent to everyone who initially participated to the procedure in order to make their comments. Gerson worked out these comments and finally submitted a complete draft of the speech which was approved by Bush. By all means- and this happened from the beginning- since a president delivers a speech it becomes his exclusive property.

V- Another topic that you have referred to in the CNN during the debates was that G. Bush had delivered an excellent speech because he managed to adapt his speech to the situation.

Katula- Did I actually say that about George Bush?

V- Yes, you did.

Katula- United Statesns are very suspicious of speakers who seem to memorize speeches and have an a priori prepared answer to each question. But, I'm sure that is how all people feel. In 2000 and 2004 debates, it looked like Gore and Kerry had memorized their answers and anticipated the questions. In subsequent (later) surveys, people argued that Bush seemed more authentic. Authenticity is the key. According to one of the oldest and most famous expressions in United States "sincerity is the most important quality of any public speaker. As soon as you learn to fake sincerity you've got it made, you win."

V- You have also said that floating voters are quite influenced by visual images. What did you mean?

Katula- United Statesns receive most of their information from television rather than newspapers. Hence, they are very much influenced by images and visual impressions. In 1980, the joke was that the election would be determined between Ronald Regan's hair and Jimmy Carter's teeth. That's what people said. In 1996, we had Bob Dole who was very old and Bill Clinton who looked much younger, and people said that made a difference. In 2004, the entire election battle was determined by an image, that of George Bush hugging a little girl, whose mother was killed on 11th September. And since the outcome of the elections of 2004 was decided to Ohio, the "Ashley Ad" gained the reputation of one of the most powerful ads in the history of political

advertising. When you see George Bush hugging that little girl, who had hardly spoken for three years since her mother's death, and all of a sudden she starts smiling, comes out of her shell, and her father says, "When the President took my daughter in his arms, what I saw was what I wanted to see in the heart, in the soul of the man who stands at the top of United States", you can understand the influence of this image. All these were visual and influenced the public crucially.

V-Can we say that these visual images, these visual representations are part of the public rhetoric *lato sensu*?

Katula- Absolutely. In our days, there is a mass publication of books concerning visual rhetoric. We are trying to conduct a research on this rhetoric and create a taxonomy that explains it.

V-So, can we conclude that the evolution of technology has influenced rhetoric as well?

Katula- You're absolutely right. Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address in front of 15.000 people. Most of them, however, couldn't even see him, because they were so far away or behind him. So, the success of the speech was based on the text and not on the image. On the contrary, today, when someone delivers a speech we have close-ups and angles. So, whenever the President speaks today, you can notice that right behind him there is a screen that transmits the main message, an United Statesn flag flying and a bust of Abraham Lincoln on the desk. Ronald Regan started this, since he was a movie actor and understood the power of visual imagery. So, these people conceive the power of symbolism. In United States we call this "semiotics".

V- So do we, probably because it is a greek word!

Television Rules of Political Communication

V- But we still have discussions and debates as well. Do you think that modern debate system has changed?

Katula- There is no doubt about that. The debate system has changed. According to a very important study, on the evening news in 1968 the average coverage time of the Presidential campaign was 8 minutes per hour, whereas in 1996 the average coverage of the candidates on the evening news was 1 minute per hour.

V- Why is that?

Katula- Because of money. Television is so expensive that the networks can only afford to cover candidates for 30 seconds, whereas, in 1968, they could spend more time for that. Now they have to get more advertising in, make more shows. The other significant change from 1968 to 1996 was that candidates learned that “it isn't what I am saying to these people in Iowa but what the news people will say I said that evening.” So politicians learned to speak in “sound bites.”

V-Sound bites?

Katula-Sound bites. The candidate has a sound bite for every issue. It is about one or two short sentences that politicians say whenever these issues come up or whenever they see cameras. For instance, phrases like “We have to build a bridge to the 21st century.” So, political rhetoric has been compressed, became more visual and the new gurus of political communication are completely aware of this.

V- In his book, *Slowness*, Milan Kundera argues that some politicians use a certain move that the author compares to moral martial arts. A skilful politician is at the centre of the political scene when he does something that is unexpected by his opponent. He goes, for example, followed by the cameras, to a restaurant where he knows that his opponent usually takes his lunch. He approaches the opponent and surprise him making a proposition like “Follow me to Nigeria to help these poor people get some food.” The instantaneous surprise and awkwardness of the rival are depicted on camera and the daring politician takes all the glory.

Katula-This is extremely important at two levels. First, when politicians speak alone, they frequently use their outstretched index showing above or right ahead. This move is used to accompany statements such as: “My friends, my fellow country men, etc”. John F. Kennedy said, “No, it has to be with the index folded, so that it is not so aggressive.” So both John Kerry and Bill Clinton follow the “Kennedy move” which is indeed much less aggressive. On the other side, going back to Kundera’s example let me remind you of a crucial moment in 2000. **Gore versus Bush in the debates. Bush is standing there answering the question, and then it is Gore’s turn to answer. Gore stood up, walked towards Bush, and talked to him.** Bush looked overtly surprised and that was the great news of the next day. They said, “What’s wrong with Gore, he’s so aggressive, impolite!”. That incident influenced mainly women voters who by nature have a certain sensitivity regarding their personal area. That truly was a critical moment. Later, in the 2004 debates, candidates negotiated over 37 rules.

V- Yes. One of them was no split screen but they did not keep that. Do you know why

this rule was not put into force?

Katula- The candidates negotiated and agreed not to have a split screen. Nevertheless, Fox channel, which had the full coverage, meaning that it was obliged to feed all the other networks during the first debate, stated that “Well, you may have negotiated this rule, but we didn’t, so we’re doing split screen.” This hurt Bush badly because due to the split screen, when Kerry was talking, Bush looked like lost. As a result, at the first debate Bush lost 5 points at gallops. Another rule, if you remember, among the 37, was that they both had to appear having the same height, even though Kerry was 1.98 and Bush 1.85.

Bush’s chair was 4 inches higher.

V- Do you think that these detailed rules they assist in promoting a healthy democracy or not?

Katula-Well, no. It would obviously be better if we had a different form of debates: a form that would favour substance over style.

V- Are there any rules that could be utilized in order to favour substance over style?

Katula-Yes, for instance, we could apply some rules from the second Gore-Bush debate. Have them both sit at a table with the moderator. That would minimize all visual stuff. And then let them have five-minute answers instead of three-minute ones. Also allow them rebuttals of two to three minutes, instead of restricting them to sixty or thirty seconds. We should render political debates more natural, dynamic and interactive.

V- Should we also allow them to ask questions to each other?

Katula- I am not sure about that, because it has been tested at other levels, such as Governor’s debates, Senator’s debates etc. and didn’t work. It has also been unsuccessfully tested in Europe, while during the last Ukrainian debates there were real conflicts. So, while in theory it’s a good idea, if you observe these debates, you will see that questions, in reality, turn into personal attacks. Surely, there could have been a rule like “You can ask questions, but if you engage in any personal attack, the microphone will be turned off.”

V-Would you also support the old and abandoned rule of unexpected questions? I mean, why should journalists have their questions given beforehand for screening and preparation?

Katula- Yes, I absolutely agree. That occurred at the second Presidential debate, which is always what they call a “Town Hall debate”, because they allow ordinary average United Statesns to ask questions. But now, according to the 37 rules, journalists have to deposit the questions ahead of time and submit them to both candidates’ teams and they have the right to accept or reject any of them. Nevertheless, the most important rule is that you do not have the right to make a big mistake. Gerald Ford in 1976, made a huge mistake which cost him the election.

V-What did he do?

Katula- He stated that Poland was not under the Soviet Union’s domination. People said: “Did he really go to college? Could he become President?” In 2004, John Kerry made two big mistakes, one in the second debate and a huge one in the last, which killed him.

V- What did he do?

Katula- In the second debate, the “Town Hall debate”, a woman asked Bush. “Mr. President, how does your religious faith influence your politics?” Kerry, who was the first to answer, said, “I’m a deeply religious person, I’ve been a Catholic all my life, I go to church regularly, however, I don’t think that I should bring my religion into my politics and use my religion in order to influence political decisions that will affect people who are of other faiths and religions.” Good answer. Then George Bush stood up and said, “I pray to God every day for Guidance, I’m a born-again Christian. My faith forms every decision I make.” This killed Kerry, because people said afterwards that with Bush they knew that his beliefs are the same as his politics, while with Kerry they did not understand the values on which his politics was based. So his answer really hurt him.

In the third debate, the question concerned the gay marriage. This constitutes a hot button issue in United States, which people conceive in religious-secular terms. John Kerry said: “Personally I believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman, however, I recognize that people have different views about this” and continued saying «for instance, Vice President’s daughter, Dick Cheney’s daughter, is gay and we should respect her for who she is”. The next day, Cheney’s wife appeared on television stating – she was screaming – she said, “John Kerry is a bad person. What right does he have to bring my daughter into his politics?” This was his death penalty, because he violated the rule according to which Presidential candidates never talk about other candidate’s families.

V- But how is it possible then for Bush to be twice elected when he has said so many weird things like “Nigeria is a great continent,” or “I know that people and fish can live together peacefully”?”

Katula- Or how about, “It’s great to be here in Latin United States. I only wish I could speak Latin.” I also have the same question and I did not manage to find an answer. “As he speaks does he think?” Mayor Richard Daily in Chicago constitutes another similar example. He is a really terrible, horrible speaker, with a lot of grammatical mistakes and lousy English – but a great mayor, one of the most famous mayors in United Statesn history. Another similar case is that of Jesse Jackson, the great leader of African United Statesn community. His speeches are so horrible that you can hardly understand them. He speaks in rhymes (couplets) like Homer: “We shouldn’t put dope in our veins, we shouldn’t put but hope in our brains. I think this is exactly Bush’s greatest weakness. It is very sad, in a lot of ways, that we can’t find in United States someone who’s both intellectually potent and also articulate.

Hilarious Incidents during a Long Journey

V- Can you mention some funny moments during your long professional course?

Katula-During the Vietnam War, I was for six months member of a team which responded to 2,200 letters that Nixon received per day. We answered all of them. The team consisted of 40 members and so we could answer using the system of snowflake. When the letters arrived, some people firstly read them all and then made what we call initial sorting. That is, they would sort the letters out in categories like “important, serious, stupid, or crazy”. Afterwards, we went to the piles and once in a while I would take all the letters with the indication “crazy” and read their suggestions.

V- Was that funny? Were you allowed to write anything you wished?

Katula- There was relative freedom and we were also allowed to answer them by telephone. We could call people and say, “Hello, this is specialist Katula, I’m calling from the Pentagon, on behalf of Richard Nixon.” And people would go “Oh!” Hey, it’s the White House on the telephone!” They’re going nuts, you know, they’re screaming. And I would say, “The President authorized me to thank you for your letter and inform you that he has taken your thoughts into consideration.” They said: “Really? The President?” I’d say, “Yes, the President. Would you like a picture of him?” “Oh, yeah!” “Great, I’ll send one out today. Ok, thanks a lot.” Or I would write to people and say “The President appreciates your letter, it was wonderful. We understand you but we would ask you to visit a psychoanalyst. We believe you’re in

desperate need of help. Would you consider jumping off a bridge?”

V- Ah, so there were a lot of crazy people who used to write to the US president?

Katula- A lot, yes. A lot of people would reveal to us a secret way to win the war in Vietnam. They would write in the letter, “Dear Mr. President, I know you will think this is a crazy idea, but I know how to win this war in Vietnam. All I need is a pair of black pyjamas, an M-16 and forty thousand dollars. I’ll go and sneak into Hanoi and with my gun tucked away, I will shoot Ho Chi Min, and just like the movies, when you kill the leader everybody else will give up.” I would reply, “Dear John, thank you for writing. The President Nixon deeply appreciates your concern for winning the war in Vietnam. We’re evaluating your plan at this point, if everything works out we will let you know. In the meantime, get help!”

V-Can you recall a funny moment during your long-lasting carrier at Northeastern University?

Katula- I was just telling someone about that. During a classroom debate, like moot court, in class, and cross-examination comes, one of the participants, a young woman seemed extremely nervous. This girl, Devorah has given a speech about why we should license satellite radio. The opponent team, a boy cross-examines her, asks her a bunch of questions, he’s not doing very well and appears the card which reminds that “You have one minute left.” Accidentally, the boy, without having any idea, asks the girl “So Devorah, did you plagiarize your speech from the internet?” She gets that blank look, and she looks out at the class and says “Yes! I did.” And then he says, “You lose.” She was one minute from winning the debate but this random question made her lose her concentration. I am sure that she thought that if she lies, she will lose and so she told the truth.

V- Do you have a pleasant memory from the University of Athens?

Katula-Oh! The funniest time we ever had in the University of Athens was, when I went out one night with my students, and they told me what “malakas” means. The next day, I swear to God, while I was walking from Pagrati to Syntagma I felt like a whole new world opened up. It was like me comprehensive ability was tripled at one moment. I was blind and now I see.