

MANIPULATING PERCEPTION INFLUENCES RESULTS: How 90 students made a terrible song a hit!

From the show biz trade newspaper, "Variety," 1963:

1: The Reverend Mr. Black (Billy Edd Wheeler and Jed Peters) 2:16
Master #38996 recorded January 23, 1963
Album: THE KINGSTON TRIO #16

Basically a narrative written around the old spiritual "Lonesome Valley," "The Reverend Mr. Black" features a distinctive lead by John Stewart and some memorable 6-string work by sideman Glen Campbell. This Billy Edd Wheeler composition, pitched to Voyle Gilmore at a Nashville convention, reportedly owes its initial success to Chicago high school English teacher William Idol. To make a lasting point about "the shaping of public opinion by vocal minorities" (as expressed in JFK's *PROFILES IN COURAGE*), Idol asked his students to choose a song they didn't particularly like to see if they could make it a hit by placing a hundred calls to a local radio station. The song they chose, on March 18, 1963, was a track from the new album THE KINGSTON TRIO #16, and within forty-eight hours Capitol released "The Reverend Mr. Black" as a single. It was a big hit in Chicago, and it cracked Billboard's Top Ten by May. Of all the Trio's singles, only "Tom Dooley" went higher.

Do you ever despair about the future of democracy in these times mass of media, multi-million dollar campaign funds and corporate clout? I do - and I got some hope back recently by remembering a story from my first year of teaching...

JFK, Sophomore Skepticism & The Kingston Trio

When I was in my first year of teaching at Chicago's Von Steuben High School, I had three classes of sophomores with about 33 students in each. We were reading *Profiles in Courage* by John F. Kennedy, and he made the point that it was very difficult to know what public opinion was at any specific time. As Senator from Massachusetts he would believe he knew how the majority of his constituency felt about a given issue, and then he would realize he'd only talked to three lobbyists, read four newspaper columns and had six phone calls about the situation. The point he was making in the book was that the squeaky wheel really does get the oil - that those who know how to manipulate perception really can have influence way beyond their numbers.

My sophomores were not buying this for a minute. Reality was made of facts, truth was easily discernible and only a stupid or evil politician could not know what his people really wanted. (Remember, this was 1962 when we hadn't yet been shaken out of our World War II certainty about the superiority of our democracy and disillusioned by the 60's, 70's, 80's, 90's and 2000's.) These 16-year-olds were very naïve compared to today's teenagers (actually I was, too, but I wasn't quite so innocent as they). I decided they needed to have an experience in how public opinion could be manipulated.

In Chicago at that time the prominent DJ was Dick Biondi on WLS blasting out across the midwest with 50,000 watts of power. Almost all the kids listened to his show every night between 8 and 11. He would take telephone votes for the first two hours and then play "the three most requested songs in all Chicago Land" (population ten million) at 10 o'clock. That morning I'd heard a new song by the Kingston Trio, great favorites of mine but not of my students. This song, The Reverend Mr. Black, was a narrated, sentimental story-song like Big John and others of that ilk. I asked my first class of the morning if they'd heard this song, and over half of them in groaned out loud and said things like, "It stinks!"

So I made them this proposal. "If you and my two other sophomore classes (a total of 99) can make this song a hit here in Chicago, will you agree that Kennedy was right and read the rest of his book with an open mind?"

"That will never happen!" they said.

I made them a deal -- if we couldn't make The Reverend Mr. Black a hit in one week, they would have no homework for the next. That got their attention and they agreed to play. They would each call WLS that night and request this "fabulous" new song by the Kingston Trio. This was Monday, and that night I listened to the Biondi show at 10 o'clock, and The Reverend Mr. Black was not played. I was stunned! All I could imagine was that the kids had not made the calls they said they would.

The next day proved that theory false. A count of the three classes revealed that, despite the busy signals, we got 32 calls through. Many were openly skeptical of our project now, so I gave them a pep talk and sent them home to try again Tuesday night. Come 10 o'clock I am glued to my radio! Once again Biondi never plays The Reverend Mr. Black - he never even mentions it!

On Wednesday I find we got 33 calls through on Tuesday night - and I encounter a lot of snickers and other expressions of derision. I give the kids another pep talk (which is received with smirks since there's not a shred of evidence to support my position), they go off to try again. What have they got lose? "Two more nights of calls and no homework for a week," they delighted in reminding me.

Wednesday night I sit by my radio again at 10 o'clock, and I'm depressed. Biondi announces "the third most requested song in all Chicago Land" - it is not The Reverend Mr. Black. Nor is "the second most requested song." I am ready to throw in the towel and am wondering how best to go about saving what little face I have left. And then Biondi says, "And the most requested song in all Chicago Land is... The Reverend Mr. Black!" I leapt out of my chair and started screaming to my roommates, "We did it! We did it! We did it!"

The next morning, despite losing a week of no homework, the kids were ecstatic, and by lunchtime the story had spread throughout the school. Starting Thursday WLS made The Reverend Mr. Black its "Silver Dollar Special" and played it every hour for the next week. This caused it to catch on nationally, and it eventually became number six in the country -- not a bad job of managing public opinion by 99 school kids! It was a lesson none of us ever forgot.

Why We Waited Until Wednesday

Most fascinating is what really happened behind the scenes on Monday and Tuesday. The reason I know is that one of my students, Marty Raisman, was the nephew of Les Brown, Chicago's bureau chief for Variety (the show-biz newspaper). Marty told his uncle about what we'd done, and Les investigated and did a piece for his paper. It turned out that The Reverend Mr. Black was part of the Kingston Trio's new album, and Capitol Records had no intention to release it as a single. When WLS called on Tuesday (after the 32 calls Monday night) and demanded to know where was this song that was creating such a furor in Chicago, Capitol rush-released it as a single, but, given no Fed-Ex in those days, Biondi didn't get it until Wednesday. Logistics is why we had to wait two days for proof of our impact!

Of course we were all delighted to learn the story: 99 high school sophomores had not only made a silly record a national hit, but had caused it to come into being as a single as well! My stature rose greatly for a couple of weeks (at most), and the kids really did understand that Kennedy was right about how easy it is to "manufacture" public opinion. But these were minor lessons compared to one I

hadn't learned at the time - and didn't learn until much later. I saw it first as a quote on a friends' refrigerator:

**A small group of thoughtful people could change the world.
Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.**

Margaret Mead

Revisiting this story has reminded me to put this quote up again where I see it daily. In times like these, I need to be reminded of the hope that comes with such simple truth. I have days of despair when everything around me seems so massive that nothing can change its momentum or direction. And then I see all these wonderful young people on their internet returning our democracy to its grass-roots origins. They're redefining what real citizenship means in an age of monopolized media, obscene campaign funding and mind-numbing population numbers. It's a marvelous thing to watch the universe unfold and reassert its infinite diversity...