

We Are What We Write



White Paper

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Language defines us. Through words, we can tell if someone is from Maine or Texas. We can tell a well-educated, professional person from someone not so well-educated and not “professional.” Language reveals who we are and even exposes the inner workings of our minds. Language also expresses our style. Hip and in jive with the times or something else.

Thanks to the Internet and Social Media, language has become an ever-expanding part of how we are perceived by others and how we perceive others. We are our words on the Internet. We are our “digital content.”

As we continue to expand digital content, therefore, it is perhaps prudent to consider more deeply what we express in a word.

What Is In A Word?

Most words have both a ‘denotative’ and a ‘connotative’ meaning. The first can be compared to the dictionary definition. The latter, the ‘connotative’ meaning of a word, is more complex. It is the associations a word has collected over time through its usage. Both the denotative and the connotative meanings of words must be considered carefully if we want ‘to say what we mean and mean what we say.’ We can express more than we intend if we do not pay close attention to both.

A Case Study

Recent reports on the tragedy in Haiti offer a case in point. Two days after the massive earthquake in Haiti, a CNN commentator noted that if help did not come soon, officials were concerned about “looting.”

Looting is what happens when riots take place or when protests go awry. Looting is criminal and identifies an activity where people steal from those who have suffered a disaster, manmade or natural, to profit from the tragedies of others.

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But is it “looting” in a situation as in Haiti when a person and his or her family -- thirsty, starving, and exposed to the elements -- enters a home or a business not his own to seek water, food, or other items necessary for survival? The devastation in Haiti is profound. The normal, daily community these people lived in was turned to rubble and the people of Haiti saw little if any “formal” or “informal” help in sight. Days went by. Conditions worsened.

Perhaps it would have been polite to wait as long as it might take for help to come but growling bellies and dry throats impose great demands on people and also on those they care about. The time came to act and to look to one’s self for what was needed. What would we think of someone who did otherwise?

Scavenging through the rubble of one’s own destroyed community certainly may look like looting to the outside world. But if we could suspend judgment for a moment and put ourselves into a similar situation, how would these actions be seen differently? If the quake had hit our homes and communities, wouldn’t we do what ever it took to stay alive—including looking for food from wherever we could find it? If we were thirsty, hungry, and exposed to the elements, we probably would hardly consider the efficient utilization of available materials to be looting. Rather we would have considered it to be “scavenging” to survive – a respectable, self-determined, and self-reliant action to take.

When is “looting” really “scavenging” for what is needed or could be used for survival for one’s self and one’s family and neighbors? The words both mean searching for things to take that are not one’s own. But the difference between the words is profound not only in what is being said about the people they describe but also about what the person communicating is thinking and feeling about them.

Of course, real looting is no doubt taking place in Haiti as it did in New Orleans and in many other communities struck by tragedy. The stronger and more powerful greedy people will always take advantage of the misfortunes of others. In fact, the same word, “looting,” was used by news media to describe events in New Orleans several days after Katrina and the breaking of the levees. But in New Orleans as in Haiti, “looting” or “scavenging” may depend on one’s perspective. One person’s “looting” for gain is another person’s “scavenging” for survival.

Clearly, there is a difference between the words “looting,” and “scavenging.” It is a matter of perspective but it is also a matter of something else. Maybe it bespeaks a lack of the sense of the

connotative meaning of words. Maybe it expresses a judgment about how people act in critical situations. We know news media are always about adding to the drama of events, as if a total natural disaster was not enough. Describing people in crisis going wild in the streets, stealing and creating havoc, feeds the media need for drama. It ramps up the emotions.

However, some members of the Black community have cried out against the negative judgment the use of the word “looting” imposes and believes it is used because the majority of Haitians are poor and black. Would news reporters use this term if the community were white and middle class? Was the term used, for instance, in the case of the Pakistan earthquake or the Indonesian tsunami? Is race and economic class involved in the widespread use of the word “looting” rather than the word “scavenging?”

Words Can Be Loaded

Content has become the “handle” that we all use when we discuss what will fill the vast spaces of digital communication. It’s one thing to say we need to revamp a website. It is another to supply the content. And where will that content come from?

When I was young and asked my Dad for money, he would often say, “I don’t see any money trees growing in the backyard.” Well, I don’t see any content trees growing back there either. Creating good content doesn’t just happen. It takes time, effort, research and good writing.

Appropriate word choice is a key ingredient. Thoughtful word choice has become critical to “say what we mean, and to mean what we say.” The use of the word “looting” by the media may be an extreme example but it does show how choosing a word flavors communication. Words reveal as much about the speaker or writer as they do about the subject.

Words we use online have even more significance because, once let loose, they can travel across time and space at the speed of light impacting those reached in profound ways. Such is the power of words for good or ill. So word choice becomes a considerable factor as we create all of the content we need for our websites, our blogs, our social media sites, and all the old and new ways we communicate.

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We all need to take care when we create content for our various marketing vehicles. We need to think about word choice like we would about handling a loaded gun. Not handled correctly, we can shoot ourselves in the foot. Handled well, the right word can make all of the difference in your message and hit the intended target and say what we mean.

And those are my words of the day.

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