

# Keep it Short, Stupid.

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As new forms of emerge, we develop new ways of communicating. The intrinsic limitations of each medium generate a surge of human creativity which ensures that the receiver understands the communication. This is the story of why a growing 160-character culture is making us communicate much more than we did before.

On 29 May 1913 there was a riot at the Paris Ballet. It was the premier of the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's ballet The Rite of Spring. The audience immediately reacted. Right from the quiet opening bassoon solo, a number of jeers and boos were heard from the audience, and as the ballet progressed, the jeering and booing escalated. The audience

were hearing something they had never heard before and reacted spontaneously. The sound was different from what they were used to, and the music, the choreography and the scenography were totally different from what they had expected to hear and see at the Paris Ballet on that night in May. Stravinsky had created a spontaneous failure, which provoked fighting in the audience. As a result, police had to arrive in the interval to restore a reasonable degree of order. The performance was completed with a certain amount of riot and disorder in the audience – but there was no doubt that the new form was making great demands on those in the audience. Later, psychologists have suggested that the surprising jumps in melody and the shifting rhythms characterising *The Rite of Spring* made the audience feel uneasy, thus making them aggressive, especially as they did not have the ability to decode the music because it went beyond their expectations and their past experience with ballets. Nobody helped them understand what they were hearing and seeing – and that left them perplexed and angry.

Freedom is what we do with the limitations we have

In 2008 Americans sent a total of about 75 billion SMS messages per month. What was originally intended as a way to use unused resources during time periods with no traffic on the mobile phone network is now a billion dollar function that has long since caught on, with all its intrinsic limitations. When the Finn Matti Makkonen invented the SMS system, he and his colleagues had to limit the amount of data per message so that the format could fit into the existing signaling format on the mobile network. The length of messages was initially limited to 128 bytes and later to 140 bytes – or the equivalent of 160 characters. The first message was, in all its simplicity, “Merry Christmas” – and since then we have used the 160 characters for a wide range of human communication. Every day, jokes, marriage proposals and gossip are flying through the network, aided by the tools we have invented to work around the limitations to our communication. But how come a medium with such great limitations is still so successful – despite the fact that abundance and unlimited possibilities are the very symbols of our present-day expectations of both media and life?

This is because limitations can be man’s best friend. Limits make us feel secure but also awaken our intrinsic creativity. All through history and everywhere in art we see how limitation has been the starting point and driver for wilder creativity. From the freaky French-

speaking Oulipo group of writers, poets and mathematicians, who, through restrictions, tried to invent new ways of writing, and the Japanese haiku poems, which were written according to stringent rules, to the American writer Hemingway, who personally found that the best novel he wrote consisted of six words. Across their fields, artists and inventors are using limitation as a principal driver of creativity, based on the philosophy that without limitations we will create nothing new of any value.

## The Power of the Smiley

From the beginning of his long career, film director Lars von Trier, who has won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, among other awards, has used strict self-imposed limitations to strengthen the creativity of his production. For instance, he made a film under the self-imposed limitation that he could spend no more than € 133,333 on its production, and in another film, camera movements were controlled by a computer. But he is probably best known as the insistent member of the quartet of film directors behind the Dogme 95 films, where a large number of international film directors undertook to abide by ten rules, referred to as “the Vow of Chastity”. For instance, they were not allowed to add sound or light after filming. The result was more than 200 films from all over the world that focused on telling their story rather than on technique. Von Trier learned the technique behind creative limitations from the hero of his youth, Danish film director and poet Jørgen Leth, who has used the art of limitation stringently in his entire production. Von Trier later turned what he had learned from Leth against him in the film *The Five Obstructions*, in which Trier challenged Leth to remake his classic 1967 short film *The Perfect Human*. In *The Five Obstructions* the master is thus tormented with his own technique by his pupil. If you know the story behind the films, they are masterpieces. However, von Trier's films are not easily accessible if you do not know the background; then the absence of added sound and light will be just a shortcoming – or the computer-controlled camera movements will be peculiar, purely and simply.

The same applies to sms messages, which would not be a very sexy medium if we had not invented an entirely new form of grammar to superimpose on the basic text communication. This technique takes its starting point in what we are dealing with – the letters and other characters available to us – adding a good deal of human creativity. One of the most

important additions is emoticons, which are now such a well-known and established aspect of our daily communication that they are taken for granted. However, the need to express the mood of a message emerged with our ability to communicate by means of text via a network where messages were sent in dialogue form but still spoke to only one of our senses. The limited bandwidth of text communication forced us to be creative. The post – from 1979 – on a mailing list is one of the best – and first – examples of that:

15-Apr-79 12:05:26-PST,1142;000000000000

Mail-from: MIT-MC rcvd at 12-Apr-79 1740-PST

Date: 12 APR 1979 1736-PST From: MACKENZIE at USC-ECL

Subject: MSGGROUP#1015 METHICS and the Fast Draw(cont'd)

To: ~drxa-had at OFFICE-1

cc: msggroup at MIT-MC, malasky at PARC-MAXC

In regard to your message a few days ago concerning the loss of meaning in this medium: I am new here, and thus hesitate to comment, but I too have suffered from the lack of tone, gestures, facial expressions etc.

May I suggest the beginning of a solution?

Perhaps we could extend the set of punctuation we use, i.e: If I wish to indicate that a particular sentence is meant with tongue-in-cheek, I would write it so: “Of course you know I agree with all the current administration’s policies -).”

The “-)” indicates tongue-in-cheek.

This idea is not mine, but stolen from a Reader’s Digest article I read long ago on a completely different subject. I’m sure there are many other, better ways to improve our

punctuation.

Any comments?

Kevin

Without a smiley, you may offend the receiver – despite the best intentions – with something that was meant to be friendly. Therefore, we need a set of characters with which we can express emotions. Kevin macKenzie's suggestion to his colleagues on the american ARPANET mailing list resulted in a rapid development – which accompanied the development of digital communication on the mobile network and the internet for the simple reason that the meaning of a message is not created by the sender alone but just as much, or perhaps to an even higher degree, in the space between the receiver and the message. Students of this field call it reception theory – research into the meaning we create when receiving communication. The difficult thing about communication is not to send a message – but to make sure it is received as precisely as possible. And that can be difficult as reception takes the form of decoding in the mind of another human being and is thus deeply dependent on the sum of his or her life experiences and cultural background. Therefore, nothing can stand alone if it is to be understood correctly. And therefore, the audience was unable to understand the depth of Stravinsky's creativity at the premiere of his new ballet on that evening in may 1913. It was the first time they heard and saw it, and nobody helped them understand it. Time has helped us, and as The Rite of spring has found its place in history, we have gradually become able to see that it is remarkable and of lasting value – in fact a work of genius – solely because we now know the context.

A 160-character culture

Emoticons make it possible for our Facebook updates, our tweets and our sms messages to be understood as intended: a smile may flicker across the receiver's face – or he will understand that now we are serious. However, our creativity goes much further than just combinations of colons, dashes and bracket signs intended to be viewed with one's head tilted to the left. Thus, as the trend towards short messages requires us to be more

economical with letters because we are rarely permitted to use more than 160 characters, we are beginning to develop other ways of squeezing more and more communication into the cramped space available. We are beginning to communicate in a more condensed way rather than at length. The basic question is: why is our use of short messages growing in an age when the technical limitations should have been overcome? “In my opinion, where there have been short message requirements imposed on current media, this has typically not been driven mainly by technical limitations but has rather been due to providers’ billing models, in the case of sms messages, or people’s shortening attention spans due to the breadth of entertainment now available, in the case of twitter and other social networks,” says Richard West, the creator of a so-called URL shortener called is.gd.

A URL shortener makes it possible to shorten very long web addresses to short strings of characters, which are better suited for media intended for short messages. “URL shortening services are useful mostly in media that allow only a limited number of characters, the best example being sms messages. URLs, which might be deep within a site or dynamically generated, very often run to 50+ characters, and this simply isn’t a good use of space within an sms message. Another very popular use is in twitter messages, which have similar restrictions,” explains Richard West, who developed his URL shortener because he was dissatisfied with the existing options.

The URL shortener is an effective addition which makes it possible to squeeze much more data into less space. If, for instance, I wanted to write a twitter message, where I have only 140 characters available, and wanted to include the URL of a previous article I wrote for Blink, I would have to write: <http://blink.mediacom.com/new-business-model>. By now I would already have used 44 of the 140 characters available – and there would not be many characters left for explanatory text. After visiting is.gd, however, all I would have to write would be: <http://is.gd/6n6Vn>, in other words only 18 characters. The link works just as well as the direct one, and it is the is.gd server that ensures that anyone who enters the shortened URL is taken to the original one. So far, is.gd has shortened 100 million links, and Richard West explains that it will be a long time before they run out of short URLs: “is.gd’s URLs won’t become significantly longer than they are currently.

They’ll stay the current length until just over 916 million shortened URLs have been created,

and after that, adding one additional character will allow over 56 billion unique shortened URLs, which is far more than is.gd will ever require.” Thus, the future can easily remain short.

## Short is good

For a long time, we believed blogs would become all the rage on the internet. However, they only caught on among large numbers of the general public when the form became short and to the point. On the other hand, we quickly learned that a status update like “Just took the dog for a walk” will get much fewer comments on Facebook than the update “The dog just took me for a walk” solely because the latter leaves room for interpretation in the receiver. Something that can happen in the encounter between text and receiver – that can shift the experience from sender to receiver. Creativity flourishes on both sides of the communication when we encounter a limitation.

## New short formats on the net

If this article has made you feel like exploring the new short formats on the internet, the natural place to start is status updates on Facebook or the large number of messages on twitter – where organisations as diverse as Wal-mart and NASA communicate their messages and a large number of celebrities keep in touch with their fan base. You can also see creativity flourish if you search the web for 6-word novels – a form inspired by Ernest Hemingway’s statement that the best novel he wrote consisted of just six words: “For sale: baby shoes, never used” – or if you enter the search string #twitterart in twitter’s search field. One thing is certain: limitations break down all limits.

## The meaning is created in the mind of the receiver

The Rite of Spring, which Stravinsky composed in 1913, was so creatively striking that it has gone down as one of the most important moments in music history – a point in music history where one could speak of a “before” and an “after”. This surge of creativity sprang in part from the art of limitation. Stravinsky had composed the whole of the rite of spring

without time signatures and the result was a piece of music which later became world-famous for its violent and unpredictable rhythms.

Those in the know about classical music speak of three categories of classical composers: those who take the past as their starting point and never let go of it, those who start in the past and move on – and Stravinsky, who started in the future. But he lacked one important thing at the premiere in Paris: the ability to convey his music to the audience. Time and, with it, many other classical experts took care of that – and only later did we all understand his vision. His music became a success when somebody who had the necessary experience and was sufficiently cultured heard it and conveyed it to the rest of us. The music lacked the punctuation which was necessary in order for it to be widely understood.

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