APPENDIX 4

Captive versus Noncaptive Audiences—How the Idea Originated

Captive and Noncaptive Audiences
A Story about How I Arrived at the Idea and What I Mean by It

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I invented the terms captive audience and noncaptive audience in 1971, when I was a twenty-year old undergraduate student taking my first interpretation course at Washington State University in the United States. One of our first assignments was to write a paper about what made interpretation "different" from other forms of information transfer. Even as a young student, I knew that this was a false premise. I saw nothing special or different about interpretation as a "kind" of communication. I reasoned that the human mind is the human mind. It doesn't change physiologically when we go from home to park to school to the supermarket to the movie to the beach to the museum. It is the same mind in every place. So communicating with that mind must too be the same in all of those places. Interpretation, as I saw it then and now, was not different in kind. Journalists, advertisers, marketers, teachers, salespeople, lawyers, politicians, preachers, song writers, play writers, screen writers, movie producers, poets, and novelists—anyone who communicates purposefully—is faced with the same human "mind-audience." Interpretation, I realized, was just another word to add to the list.

Yet, as an interpreter, I knew there was some other kind of difference that I just hadn't seen yet. Interpreters everywhere know that there is something different about interpretation! And so I continued looking for an answer until I found it in psychology. There I discovered something that has guided and informed my understanding of interpretation for more than three decades. I learned that what is different about interpretation isn't the audience or the "kind" of communication that takes place. What is different is how the audience sees things. It's their mind-set or mental state that distinguishes interpretation from some other forms of information transfer. Interpretation usually takes place where people go to have fun (parks, museums, zoos, botanical gardens, aquariums, theme parks, and so forth). It's their goal of enjoying themselves while learning that makes interpretation different from some other communication activities. This realization motivated me to continue working on the assignment.

Remembering Tilden's dichotomy that "interpretation is provocation, not instruction," and recalling that even his definition of interpretation stressed that it is "not simply communicating

factual information," I found what I had been looking for in order to write my paper. Tilden was so emphatic about contrasting interpretation with teaching because he feared that fact-bearing interpreters would see it as "instruction." He knew that visitors would not respond well to that sort of interpretation because it didn't fit with their purpose for being in a park. They didn't see parks as classrooms but rather as pleasuring grounds. The difference I looked for lay not in the kind of communication that interpretation is, nor was it in the kinds of audiences that visitors are. Rather it lay in the psychological state they brought with them to the interpretive encounter.

Thinking more deeply about it, I envisioned a single human being, a woman, in many different communication environments. I instantly realized that this same woman could, in a single (albeit very long) day, attend class at the university, read a magazine at home, be a member of a jury, be approached by a salesperson, listen to a song on the car radio, and attend an interpretive program in a local park that evening. One cannot refute the fact that in each case, it was the same person with the same mind. But obviously, many things were different about the communication environments. The context was different (classroom versus courtroom versus home, car, or park). The kinds of outcomes the communicator sought were different in each case (academic performance, entertainment with words or music, purchase of the product, a vote to convict or acquit, and of course, for the interpreter, provocation). And finally, the rules of engagement were different (teachers and students are expected to interact in certain ways and not others, lawyers must follow strict rules about argumentation and presenting evidence, the writers of the magazine and song could not even see their audiences, and the interpreter would face an informal pleasure-seeking audience who would be accepting of many communication styles as long as it could be inspired about the park).

As I thought more about these differences of contexts, outcomes and "rules" of communication, I began to put them into categories of "alike" and "different," based on the role the person played in each environment. When I was done categorizing them, I was left with a result similar to this:

> Alike: jury member, reader at home, driver of a car, and park visitor
>
> Different: student

At first not even realizing what criteria I had applied in making the lists, I was dumbfounded by how much work it had taken me to arrive at such a simple solution, one that would surely earn me a high mark on my paper. When the same woman was in any of the "alike" roles, she didn't have to have to worry about grades and marks and qualifications. She could even ignore

the communication, or let her mind wander, without fear of punishment. In each of these cases, she would choose of her own free will to pay attention, or not at all. Her reward for attention paying came from within her: it was internal. But in the classroom, if she failed to pay attention she would be punished by a system external to her, and if she paid close attention she would be rewarded by the same system. At this point, the notion of external versus internal rewards had become a sort of "axis" in my thinking. But where would I take it from there?

Being a student at the time, I realized that the promise of reward or threat of punishment was like a prison. We are held captive by an external reward system (such as grades and academic assessment), whereas when we don't have to worry about punishments and external rewards, it is only our intrinsic satisfaction with the communication itself that leads us to attend to it. In one instance we are "captive" and in the other we are "noncaptive." This difference is psychological. It is not the reward or punishment itself that makes an audience "captive." It is the person's understanding and acceptance of it that creates the prison. I thought of one of my classmates, a good guy, but he didn't care about his grades. This was the "rebellious" 70s, and he was in the class purely for his intrinsic enjoyment of the subject matter—even if he failed, it mattered little to him. Sitting next to him in class a few days after turning in my paper, I realized that he was a noncaptive audience and I was a captive one, even though we were in the same class learning from the same teacher. The external rewards I sought (a good grade, a job recommendation from my teacher, and being respected as a "good" student) were literally of no interest to him. He was just there to be stimulated by the information regardless of what kind of evaluation he received. At the end of the semester, we both earned very high marks in the class, and both of us have enjoyed long careers as interpreters.

The key difference I had been looking for had turned out to be psychological, not physical in any way. It is how the audience sees the communication environment that makes interpretation different from some (but not all) other forms of communication. And so the communicator must understand the mental state of the audience and adjust his or her approach according to the way the person's mind sees the context of the communication environment. In the case of the noncaptive audience, we must work diligently to capture and hold attention if we want to achieve our goal of provocation.

At some point the night I began writing my paper, I typed the words captive and noncaptive for the first time in my life. And they have been part of my vocabulary ever since. I wrote briefly about the concept in a 1983 journal article on cognitive psychology and interpretation, but I did not introduce it in writing to practicing interpreters until 1992, when I published *Environmental Interpretation.*

Since publication of that book, I have been amazed with the amount of confusion that this simple concept has sometimes created. The biggest error interpreters make with the idea is that they think that captive and noncaptive refer to different kinds of people. They clearly are not kinds of people. As you saw in my little story, the same person can be both kinds of audiences in a single day. A second mistake interpreters make is thinking of captive and noncaptive as though they were different kinds of places. They clearly are not places either. The person in our example could attend the evening interpretive program as a visitor and then return to the same park the next day with her university biology class as a student—noncaptive the night before and captive the next morning. And, of course, my classmate and I sat next to each other in the same classroom, one of us captive and one of us noncaptive at the same moment in time. Finally, and this is most important, interpreters must not make the error of assuming that only park interpretation audiences are noncaptive. This is not true. All audiences who are free to ignore us (without fear either of punishment or having to forfeit a reward), are noncaptive. This includes virtually every audience outside of academia or other instructional setting in which people are held accountable to demonstrate their own learning (e.g., to earn a grade or mark of some kind, a qualification, formal certificate, or license, and so on). In this sense, all the great novelists, journalists, song writers, advertisers, and the rest are interpreters. They just work in different contexts than most heritage interpreters work in.

In ending, I want to share a little secret. But it is a secret that will come as no surprise to many of you. Every audience—even the student in a classroom preparing for an exam—is biologically noncaptive. Our brains have programmed themselves through eons of evolution to seek the most gratifying stimuli they can find, and they engage during every moment throughout our lives in a never-ending quest for enjoyment of some kind—pleasurable thought. This is why students who are bored by their teacher have to work so hard to pay attention. They must overcome what their minds are programmed to do—provide enjoyable stimulation. And when their minds prevail in the battle, they may find themselves daydreaming in class. So to my fellow educators, I want to leave you with this piece of advice: Even though your students are a captive audience who are held prisoner by the external rewards academia imposes on them, you will teach them more, and they will love you forever, if you treat them every day as if they were a noncaptive audience. Work hard to make them want to learn from you, as if they had a choice—as they would if they were park visitors attending your interpretive program. Some of the best interpreters on earth are classroom teachers who simply choose to see things this way.

Post-script: I recall that my teacher liked the paper.

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