Ken Kesey as a Counterculture Figure

By D. Ellie Howell

Assignment Description: This assignment is to study and evaluate a counterculture. The argument will need to include a definition and an evaluation. The intent of the paper is to identify and analyze a minimum of three principle communication strategies used rhetorically in advancing their cause. Clearly state why these strategies were effective or ineffective. The assignment was completed for Professor Lisa Waite’s Counter-Culture Communication.

The sixties were alive with a new philosophy, a new message, and gigantic amount of youths ready to surf the oncoming wave of social change. The Hippies sought to live for the moment, encourage the spread of love and unity towards all humans, and help campaigns grant dignity to all people. Acid became a passport to a world of psychedelic colors and experience. It changed people’s common perception and led to the individual but collective epiphany that there is a vastness beyond what we can ever hope to understand.

Because of the new incitement towards drugs for experience purposes, a new wave of creativity began a beautiful emergence into the center stage of fine arts. Ken Kesey stood out as an extraordinary writer of his day. His success as a novelist and his engagement in the acid experiments made him become a well celebrated and emulated iconic figure, legendary even today. He, along with a group of identity-rejecting, yuppie spawn called the Merry Pranksters aligned themselves in opposition to mainstream society. Independently, Kesey was able to use his arsenal of English as a communication strategy. Collectively, he and the Merry Pranksters used strategies of intercultural communication and nonverbal communication to perpetuate concepts of unity, internal strength, and love for one’s fellow human.

In the early sixties, it was known that acid use was on the rise, but with scientifically puzzling effects. During this time, scientists administered over 200 LSD studies (Mehling, 1997). Naturally, Kesey was onboard. Afterwards, he came to believe acid to be a bridge to a new frontier filled with rich exotic symbolism that only those who partook could ever experience. It was his goal and mission to encourage others to have the power to experience the world from their inner mind’s eye (Christensen, 2009). Kesey did not hesitate with his involvement in the acid test: “I felt like I was doing the American thing, as Neil Armstrong when he volunteered to go to the moon. There was a new place to be explored and we were astronauts” (Christensen, 2009, p.55). His jubilation at this new frontier expressed the idea of freedom not lost on this generation. At the end of his test, he experienced a great awakening of his senses and his purpose. The writer in him exploded. From this new awakening, his brain hatched a concrete gift to the world, a novel titled, One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

Kesey was able to use his writing as a key communication strategy. This 1962 splendor follows the antics of R.P. McMurphy as he feigns mental illness and sets to emancipate the minds of his fellow patients under the slimy nose of Nurse Ratchet. The concepts explored within these pages are a mere microcosm of the emancipation of the minds of the people in this decade. The patients’ response to

THE WRITING CENTER REVIEW
McMurphy, especially during the escape of the pensive Chief Bromden, was how Kesey hoped the world would react to the stirring up of one’s own perception. This incredible novel can be read repeatedly with benefit, earning it a place on the shelf of greatness. The concepts of firm opposition of authority will live on. Do not be a slave to the machine of society; think critically about everything and never settle in a position that doesn’t thrill you. Kesey wrote as a messenger, not as a scholar. Past professors recalled him as a poor speller who wrote quickly, but effectively (Christensen, 2009). Even to trivialize the importance of grammar and spelling, as a writer, is a stance of opposition. It seems that everything this man did was to the beat of his own drum and a huge following was coming his way.

His notability as a writer and counterculture symbol led to the establishment of the Merry Pranksters, another group representative of counterculture believes because of their dedication to the spread of laughter, joy, and happiness to the outside world. The exploits of the Merry Pranksters’ bus, “Further,” provided them the means to engage in intercultural communication during their Midwest and Southern travels. This wanderlust and the physical distance the group traveled was a metaphor for the distance a person is able to go beyond their limited frame of reference when drugs are ingested (Carnes, 1974). Exploring these different areas, gave them a chance to interact with others of different cultures and spread their own cultural values to new audiences. The Merry Pranksters’ passionate recruiting of the straight community was a very loving action. Today, in-group and out-group members rarely recognize others’ humanity, let alone communicate such a grand and enlightening message. This group defied the gravitational pull towards similarity and explicitly targeted the out-group. It was love that brought them to say, “Hey, I found out how to be happy! You there, in the suit and tie, I feel like you could really benefit. Come, see how I see!” This delivery of unity, power and love was why intercultural communication was so important to advance the cause. As Ken Kesey said himself, “When you’ve got something like we’ve got, you can’t just sit on it and possess it, you’ve got to move off it give it to other people. It only works, if you bring other people into it” (Christensen, 2009, p. i).

The Merry Pranksters communicated a powerful message through their nonverbal communication as well. The way they dressed as well as the flamboyant furnishings of Further were highly effective in drawing attention from the selected crowd. “They dressed in fantastic costumes, frequently those of comic-strip heroes” (Carnes, 1974, p. 35). Even just seeing the bus communicated a message. The sight of something out of the ordinary was enough to begin the kindling. The Midwest was a breeding ground for “Hippie hatred.” This was because of the counterculture’s relentless challenging of the middle class lifestyle, a lifestyle that glorified fiscal achievement and possessions (Frank, 1997). The Merry Pranksters disagreed with their way of thinking, but sought to change their minds though pleasant images, happy colors, peace signs and smiley faces. Even if the sight of the bus was met with admiration, apprehension, or abhorrence, causing someone to process something beyond their frame of reference may cause them tread along new boundaries. This could spark an internal dialogue that may have led them to investigate the rigidity of their own lives. The collaboration of these power sources was short-lived, but the success of this ideology has been intertwined inside the
counterculture spirit for nearly 60 years. Ken Kesey’s personal mission was in helping all humanity un-wedge themselves from the oppressive niche carved by society’s conformity. During his life, he realized this was not completely realistic. He then assumed a task of simply trying to affect society on a micro level (Carnes, 1974). This cannot be seen as a failing, because he did not display himself as a big shot celebrity. Through the cherished messages in his novels, he tailored a personalized message to his readers and followers. The immortality of his mission still has the ability to encourage and inspire others to seek out the truth in our world. A chapter in Christensen’s Acid Christ is titled “Kiss No Ones Ass”. This capitalizes the feeling of greatness he instills in the common person. For him the drug use was gateway to these discoveries but today people can hold those ideas but not partake in any substances. Many teens and young adults against drug use the term “straight edge,” to describe their actions, but at the same time walk the razor’s edge of nonconformity.

Today, drug use is not only discouraged, it is outlawed. However, one key principle remains the same. We have become a society of freethinkers with more breadth and depth to our discussion and our own internal dialogue. Professors welcome the argument brought up by a skeptical student and at times encourage students to play devil’s advocate during debates. America in no way can be perceived as a meek push over. People are bold and strong about their opinions and beliefs. Ken Kesey along with the other pioneers of the day helped crack this gilded world apart. He dove deep into the serene core our very existence, along with the bus of Merry Pranksters spreading joy to the routes they embarked. They proved that humanity is not mere cosmic dust thrown into a vacuum of eternity. We are so much more than that and each day we decide for ourselves just what we are to become.
References


