COMMUNICATION MATTERS – the 2010 Prisons IMBs’ Conference

SIGNAL AND NOISE – what are we really trying to say? And what do people hear?

It’s natural to believe that what you want to say other people want to hear, indeed it is natural to believe that what you have said others have heard. It’s only when you check it out, when you ask people what they have heard, that you discover that they heard something completely different from what you had thought they said.

When the title Communication Matters was suggested for our 2010 conference my memory is that it was so uncontroversial that there wasn’t even any discussion in the Council and I don’t think we had any question about whether to accept it. It seems obvious that a community of independent monitors would want to communicate their findings to ministers, to NOMS, to their local community, even to the general public; such a community would want their message heard. Noticing that people are being fairly and respectfully treated or not in the custodial setting is one thing; noticing that there are aspects of the physical environment that leave a great deal to be desired and require a lot of capital expenditure is one thing, that regimes are suffering and will suffer more from the withdrawal of essential resources is one thing. But the real task is to get that message heard where it matters: to modify the famous Engels comment, the need is not to understand the world but to change it, the issue is not just to notice what is happening in the establishment you monitor but to change it: and since we are not executives but monitors that can only happen by speaking and writing clearly and directly to those people – ministers, NOMS management, governors – who do have the authority to make things different.

So we might have accepted Communication Matters as our title simply because it’s obvious that it does. The word ‘platitude’ doesn’t ordinarily come to mind when the name of Mike Davis, the lead in organising this event, is mentioned – but perhaps we accepted his proposed title because like last year’s Perceptions it was one with which nobody could take issue. And to look critically at the way IMBs individually and together are getting their message across in words, in print, however we do it – or not getting it across – is to look at communication matters and we look at communication matters because we know communication matters.

However there lurks within that uncontroversial title something more significant, more ominous. It’s a long time since as a raw student of psychology I looked properly at
communication theory; but as I thought about this gathering there came back to me the phrase ‘signal to noise ratio’. The badly tuned radio makes the point most obviously, as the interference drowns out the music or the talk you are trying to hear; and as for the joy of trying to engage in a conversation in a crowded room if you’re a hearing aid wearer, well I am sure there are many here that know what I mean. The noise quite simply drowns out the signal, and all you hear is the crackling; if it’s bad enough you become so tired of it that you give up.

We have become spoiled of course. The elderly among us were entirely used to fiddling around with a crystal set for fun or a transistor radio to try and get the best signal – that is one that would pierce through the noise of a level interference that we would take for granted in those far off days and would be completely intolerable now. My understanding of digital reception is that you either receive it or you don’t. Ancient buildings were sometimes acoustically brilliant – but it was pretty much guesswork, and in these days of sophisticated public address systems and induction loops we easily forget how much effort used to have to go into the simple business of listening. We have progressed beyond recognition from those days, and digital technology means that if you don’t get good reception from a particular station – and good means pretty much noise free – you won’t get any reception at all.

Given that process of advanced technological improvement, what you might call the constant improvement we have come to expect in the ratio of signal to noise, it’s easy to forget the element of personal responsibility in all this. In the end deciding what is to count as signal and what as noise, what you choose to attend to and what you choose to block out, is a skill for which the human brain is brilliantly adapted or we would hear nothing at all. The baby learns as it grows not just that what is this side of the end of her finger is her while what is beyond the end of her finger is the ‘not-her’; she also learns how to separate out in the ‘not-her’ what is significant from what is not. Sometimes we are aware of making those choices – the person trying to take part in a conversation on Euston Station is only too aware of it – but mostly we’re not aware of the choices we are making all the time, choices to block out and let in, choices to hear messages and choices to refuse to hear them. When other people fail to listen to what we think we have said very clearly we become very irritated – forgetting that we too are making choices about what we hear and what we do not, and that taking responsibility for the choices we make means above all noticing that we are in fact choosing what we hear. Communication matters are responsibility matters, choice matters, decision matters; being effective communicators means noticing not just what other people are not hearing of the great wisdom we are seeking to impart but also our own role in the process of selection. When people say to a person with hearing loss, intending it as a tease, ‘you just hear what you want to hear’ they are saying something which can be rather cruel, unless they also notice that is true for us all. We hear what we want to hear, because hearing requires a lot of concentration.

It’s time for me to stop being general and abstract, and talk directly about the signal to noise ratio in our independent monitoring. It’s very common, and will not get less common, to read in an annual report that this or that comment has been made in two or three or four previous reports from the same Board. It might be the general issue of overcrowding, or the fact that imprisonment involves for many prisoners living your life with another person nearly all the hours of the day, and living it in the lavatory you share, or the fact that time and again
prisoners are moved to open or training prisons who have sentences too short for them to take advantage of the facilities and opportunities available, or that IPP prisoners are in the double bind of having to prove they are not a risk to society but not being able to access the contexts in which they could demonstrate that. Whatever the issue, the problem the IMB faces is not just that there isn’t the money to do something about it; it’s clearly their sense that year after year they speak and are not even heard. And time and again, as many of you will know, I write letters thanking IMBs for their annual reports and encouraging – almost beseeching them – not to desist from comments they have made again and again, but to keep on making the point.

I’ve no regrets about encouraging people in the way of persistence. If we stop making a point because it hasn’t been heard it will disappear completely. And we can never tell when a comment that been apparently ignored year after year will come unexpectedly to the top of the agenda. A couple of IMBs banged on year after year about the late arrival of young prisoners – apparently to no effect; suddenly those statistics, produced for years without real response become the instrument for showing that figures in a parliamentary answer were wrong, and suddenly ministers took notice. The signal at last penetrated the noise. And it is our responsibility to see that it does.

Some of you have been saying clearly over the years that the notion that ‘slopping out’ had ended was not true in your prison – and the myth persisted nonetheless that since Lord Woolf’s report that indignity had ended. Suddenly an article in *Inside Time*, and we have the real possibility that John Weightman’s report will burst through the noise.

But there is, and we must be realistic about this, a huge amount of noise at the moment (in the sense of the word ‘noise’ as I’m using it), making the signal difficult to hear. What is the signal we want to be sending? I suggest that it is this: the only way in which to reduce criminal activity and enable people to readjust their lives to something constructive is to ensure that they see in those with whom they are in contact while in custody real examples of respect and fairness. That’s our signal: we repudiate the notion that there is a conflict between action to reduce crime, to carry out appropriate punishment, to support victims of crime, and on the other hand accord those convicted of offences with the dignity that human beings have whatever they may have done. That’s our signal. The noise is about suggesting these objectives are in conflict and therefore toughness is the only requirement for crime reduction. And when it is said that that is the view held by ‘the public’, that toughness is the only way to reduce crime, our signal is that we too are part of the public, and in this matter a part of the public that is particularly knowledgeable about what prison actually means. I was struck by one of the briefest but most significant observations made by the Minister yesterday: that the auction in ‘toughness’ between the parties is at an end. This is hugely encouraging.

We know that much of the time it seems that the ‘noise’ has more power, more official support, than our signal. We have been getting strong messages from government about the need to economise, to reduce the cost of our monitoring activity; staff at the secretariat had to face enormous efforts from some other part of Whitehall to reduce the cost of this conference – when you pay for your drink tonight you will be helping the public sector deficit and I hope that makes the drink taste better. There was even a last-minute attempt to tell us to cancel the conference altogether. Those who sent these messages thought that was the signal they needed
to send and we needed to hear. But of course it is in reality not signal but noise they were sending: there are 85,000 people incarcerated, not counting the immigration detainees. It costs around £40,000 a year to lock someone up. What does it cost to monitor their treatment for its fairness and respect? The answer is about £35 per prisoner per year; cancel this conference, and you might save less than £1 of that. The truth of the matter is that if you want to economise on monitoring there’s only one way to do it. It is to lock less people up; then you won’t have so many people to monitor. You’ll save not £1 a time but £40,000 a time. That is understood by the Minister who spoke to us yesterday and is supported by the instincts of the Secretary of State. We live in a time when there is support for our signal through the noise.

We seem to live in hopeful times as far as the grasping of that message is concerned. The Secretary of State has made it clear that this kind of programme of reduction has his support, and we heard as much from the Minister. But we also know that this is a highly controversial area of policy, and there are all the signs that people are trying to get the noise machine working again. We have, while continuing to monitor the treatment of all those committed to prison by the courts, however few or many they are, to continue to produce the evidence – and the evidence is overwhelming – that overpopulating the prison system prevents it from doing its job: the efficiency savings are going to be humanity savings, creativity savings, rehabilitation savings. That’s for the obvious reason that the main and non-negotiable expense of imprisonment is the hardware and the security. The savings come from elsewhere, and the ‘elsewhere’ is the creative work that many prisons are doing or enabling to be done.

So the question for us is how to get our signals clear, to produce the facts that will support a serious change of direction. Please notice that I’m not asking for us to become biased in our observations: good work needs praising, and what we say should always be what we see and nothing but what we see and hear; but how is it that when one annual report after another speaks of the negative effects of budget savings and overpopulation, when the Chief Inspector’s staff set out to collate the views of IMB chairs, with the support of your elected representatives the general trend of those who answered the questionnaire (and there’s a question why so many did not) is that the savings have not had that much effect? Is it that we asked the question too early for the effects to become clear? – but frankly, if we wait the effect of the savings will be disastrous Or is it that we are still reluctant to be heard sending a clear signal that people could hear and understand? I read in report after report that purposeful activity and time out of cell have declined in many establishments in report after report from Boards. If that is so we must say so – in a loud and clear signal that interrupts the tabloid noise that suggests that it doesn’t matter anyway: being locked up for hours on end is not more than convicts deserve – whether or not it encourages a facing of offending behaviour.

Many times I have heard the message that it is the general desire of IMBs and their members to put our work on the map, to enable what we say to be heard. Officially that is happening: ministers express their support, and NOMS and governors will generally say when asked that they would not be without our monitoring activity. I am sure there is genuine respect, as well as the sense that it is a protection for the system to have independent monitors around. Officially we have been made part of the ‘national preventive mechanism’ that the UK is
required to have as a precaution against torture and inhumane or degrading treatment. Officially we are on the map.

But it cannot be said too often that our being on the map as far as the public are concerned lies in the weight of our arguments and observations and the clarity with which we express ourselves. Our reports will continue to need to cover a lot of ground, but if I may say with respect to all those who write them they must also be punchy where there are clear signals to be sent, and those clear signals need to be expressed in the local and national media. Generalities and whinges are not news: clear statements of direction and observation are news. That’s why I think it was regrettable that it was not seen as an opportunity by all Boards to work with HMIP concerning efficiency savings.

It is a time for signals to penetrate the noise, for the experience of years of monitoring to issue in direct statements of the direction we must pursue, a direction in which warehousing human beings is reduced and creative engagement with the causes of offending increased. In the long run that is the investment our society needs to make in a future with less crime and disorder. What we are doing at the moment is not investment but expense. That’s because the noise is drowning out the signal, and I hope what I have said may encourage IMBs to play their part in changing the signal to noise ratio for the better, and changing it for good.

Peter Selby
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