In a fifth grade arithmetic textbook written by E. T. McSwain and published by the Laidlaw Bros. in 1965, children are asked to find the answer to the following problem:

"How many quart jars will Miss Tompkins need to can five bushels of tomatoes?"

In a New York City classroom the other day it was interesting to note that neither teacher nor children were disturbed by this problem. On this basis, this little example of poor communication is directed only to non-city slickers.

The object of this paper is to show how myth is used to communicate whole, as distinct from partial, perceptions of social situations. Certain definitions of myth are suggested. These are illustrated by two case studies which demonstrate the way in which myth is used as a means of communicating highly complex abstract ideas in an apparently simple concrete form. The paper ends with a brief review of the studies from different disciplines which have attempted to tackle this problem of the perception and communication of wholes.

The aim of this paper is to continue the examination of myth begun in an earlier study [16] and, in particular, to define the way in which myth is used in communication. To this end certain propositions regarding myth and its characteristics will be made and these will be illustrated by the use of examples.

1. The term myth, as used in this paper, is defined as follows:

   "The term myth will be used to mean the expression of abstract ideas in a concrete form. A myth takes the form of a story that embodies certain ideas and at the same time offers a justification of those ideas. If the myth is to be effective it must be so constructed as to appeal to the emotions and enlist sympathy for the ideas expressed, and, at the same time, the subject matter of the story must offer an acceptable justification of those ideas. The actual truth or falsity of the story is irrelevant; what is important is that the story and the ideas it embodies are accepted and believed to be true" [16].

   A myth is a story about a particular incident which is put forward as containing or suggesting some general truth. In other

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words myth is a generalisation put forward in a particular and concrete form. If the story is accepted as being generally true then it becomes a myth; if it is accepted only as a story describing a particular case but not of general application then it does not become a myth but remains merely an illustrative anecdote. To develop this point further, the story element is intended to convey a perception of a general situation through the description of one particular case. In other words the myth is a paradigm or model of the general situation. Thus the description of a single incident concerning a manager and a worker in a plant may be used to convey a perception of the general situation regarding relations between management and workers in that plant, or even a perception of relations between management and workers in industry generally.

2. Myth conveys the perception of a whole, of a complete entity. Rational analysis and description can proceed only by describing the parts that make up the entity; the sum of these parts will not necessarily convey a perception of the whole. Most people have the ability to perceive an entity when it is presented to them in the form of a myth but unless they are highly trained in the appropriate skills, and often not even then, they cannot reconstruct an entity from the analytical presentation of its various parts.

3. Myth is a very concise way of conveying a perception. Within the form of one short story it can convey a perception of a situation and the complex of attitudes, beliefs, and values that were used to structure the situation. To convey all this by means of a rational analysis and description would be a very lengthy process, much too lengthy and too clumsy to be used as a normal method of communicating perceptions from one person to another.

4. Myth is easily and universally understood. Few people are trained to interpret the rational analysis of an involved situation and even fewer are capable of making such an analysis for themselves. However, most people can understand myths and, even if they cannot readily create myths themselves, can use myths as a means of conveying their perceptions of situations to others.

5. Myth, although a generalisation, is concrete and particular. This means that myth can readily be understood by people who are used to dealing with concrete situations or of thinking in terms of such concrete situations but who have developed to only a very limited extent the skill of dealing with abstract principles and ideas. Myth deals in terms of a particular individual or individuals in a specific situation; thus, it is possible for the hearer to identify with these individuals and to respond emotionally to them. In fact a myth, if it is to be accepted as such, must be designed to cause identification and to arouse emotional responses [see 16, 17]. It is obviously difficult to cause identification or to arouse such emotional responses if one is dealing in terms of abstract generalisations.

6. Myth is imprecise and often presents perceptions that are not fixed but may be both loose and fluid. This means that myth is not a suitable medium for the communication of precise perceptions but it also means that it has distinct advantages when it is necessary to communicate perceptions that cannot be precisely structured. Such perceptions can be caused by one or both of the following: (i) the situation itself being imprecise, (ii) the means used to structure the situation being imprecise. Thus:

i. (a) Many situations are fluid and cannot be structured precisely owing to the large number of variables involved and to the frequent changes in the relations between these variables.
   (b) A situation may change gradually over a period of time; if this situation is structured precisely the resulting perception would soon be out of date. If it is loosely structured, modification can be made easily and imperceptibly.

ii. Perceptions are created as a result of structuring situations by means of attitudes, beliefs, and values [16]. Thus, in order to share a perception, individuals must also share similar attitudes, beliefs, and values. However, this implies only a broad consensus within which there may well be individual variations in the strength with which each one holds some or all of these attitudes, beliefs, and values. In these circumstances the means used in structuring and, in consequence, the resulting perception, can rarely be precise.
Myth can adequately convey perceptions that are flexible and imprecise, as in the cases described above, this permits myth to have a wide appeal. A precisely defined perception will be acceptable to only a few; one flexible enough to allow of individual variation, within a general pattern, may be acceptable to many. A rational analysis gives more precise definition but it does not permit flexibility. In fact the only way in which it can communicate a loose and fluid perception is by making qualifications, and a qualified statement is a difficult and clumsy means of communication. Thus the flexibility of myth is an advantage because it extends the range of material it can communicate and the range of people to whom it can communicate.

7. Myth is used, consciously and deliberately, to arouse emotional responses; in communicating the perception of a situation it also communicates the emotions aroused by that perception. A rational analysis of a situation describes the emotions aroused; myth attempts to communicate them directly by arousing similar emotions in the hearer. In fact myth is often more concerned with communicating an emotional response to a perception than it is with communicating the perception itself.

i. In order to do this, myth makes an emotive use of language as distinct from a scientific use of language. J. A. Richards who created these terms defined them thus: "A statement may be used for the sake of the reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the scientific use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects on emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the emotive use of language. The distinction once clearly grasped is simple. We may either use words for the sake of the references they promote or we may use them for the sake of the attitudes and emotions which ensue" [14].

ii. As Richards also points out, the way in which language is used affects the way in which the perception communicated is structured; if language is used scientifically it must be structured logically, if language is used emotively this is not necessary: "Further, in the scientific use of language not only must the references be correct for success, but the connections and relations of references to one another must be of the kind which we call logical. They must not get in one another’s way, and must be organised so as not to impede further reference. But for emotive purposes logical arrangement is not necessary. It may be and often is an obstacle. For what matters is that the series of attitudes due to the references should have their own proper organisation, their own emotional interconnection, and this often has no dependence upon the logical relations of such references as may be concerned in bringing the attitudes into being" [14].

In short, myth is often primarily concerned with communicating emotions, the proper emotional responses to a perception. But it is also concerned with conveying perception itself; the two are inseparable and myth cannot communicate emotions about a perception without also communicating that perception. However, in practice the emotional aspect is dominant and, although the actual perception conveyed may sometimes be vague and amorphous, the emotions communicated are nevertheless strong and definite. As emotion is more easily conveyed orally, myth, although it can be and often is conveyed in written form, is used predominantly in oral communication.

The propositions made above overlap to some extent and the relations between them may seem vague and difficult to order in a logical sequence. This is unavoidable; the essence of myth is that it is an entity and cannot be broken down into exclusive categories. The whole is always more than the sum of its parts. As McLuhan has stressed, "Myth is the mode of simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects" [10, p. 268]. The key word is simultaneous; one cannot convey "simultaneous awareness" by means of separate descriptive categories. Thus what we have been attempting to do above is to describe by means of a rational analysis a method of communication which is not dependent upon rational analysis and cannot be adequately described by such means. Carpenter, comparing the new mass media with the old medium of writing, makes this point very clearly:

"There’s pattern in these new media—not line, but knot; not linearity or causality or chronology, nothing that leads to a desired climax, but a Gordian knot without antecedents or results, containing within itself carefully selected elements, juxtaposed, inseparably fused; a knot that can’t be untied to
give the long, thin cord of lineality” [1, p. 165]. In short, any attempt to analyse and describe myth must necessarily be inadequate but the attempt must be made nevertheless. However, the inadequacies of the above propositions can be made good to some extent by studying actual examples of how myths are used in communication. To this end we will now examine two examples of myth.

The first myth to be described is that of the industrial depression of the 1930’s. This myth is a very powerful one in the British trade union movement and in the Labour Party. The story content of the myth varies in detail but its essentials are constant; it describes the conditions of the working classes during the depression: the millions of unemployed, the low level of wages, the brutal way in which workers were treated by employers who knew that in a period of high unemployment they had the whip-hand. The myth also dwells on the hardships of workers and their families during the depression, the degradation of the “dole” and the “Means Test,” and the inadequate rates of benefit which meant hardship and malnutrition for the families of the unemployed. The myth is an indictment of the employers who behaved badly during the depression and of the political party in power at the time, the Conservatives, who allowed these things to happen. In short the myth conveys attitudes of hostility toward the Conservative Party, the employers, and to the capitalist system in general and justifies these attitudes by references to the depression.

The author has heard this myth used on many occasions to convey a perception of the relations between employers and employed and to justify hostility and a refusal to cooperate with employers. One particular example will be described as being typical and as illustrating the way in which myth is used to communicate a perception. This example was noted during a meeting in a large industrial town in Scotland. The meeting had been called by the town council with the object of discussing industrial development in the area and asking for the cooperation of employers and trade unions in attracting new industries to the town. The meeting included members of the town council, civil servants, local government officials, and representatives of employers and trade unions in the town. When the question of cooperation between employers and trade unions to increase productivity and to attract new industry to the town was being discussed, one of the trade union officials stood up to act as spokesman for the trade union representatives. The spokesman did not touch directly upon the subject under discussion but launched into a highly impassioned account of the depression in general with examples of how it had affected people in that particular town. He described general conditions as outlined above, then made particular references to the number of unemployed in that town, the queues outside work-gates and outside the Labour Exchange, the poverty of the unemployed and their conditions of life. He closed by emphasising that these conditions could return again. This was not described coolly and dispassionately but loudly and excitedly and with an attitude of strong moral indignation. When the Chairman, the Provost of the town and a member of the Labour Party, pointed out that this was in the past and had no direct relevance to the issues under discussion, the spokesman and other trade union officials present answered him by recalling further incidents that had occurred in the town during the depression. They did not at any time discuss the subject of cooperation at the present day directly. Some of the employers’ representatives present made it clear that they could not understand the discussion at all; others stated that they knew what the spokesman meant but thought it irrelevant at the present day.

In informal discussion with the trade union representatives and Labour councillors after the meeting it was clear that all knew and accepted the myth of the depression and understood what the spokesman meant when he told this myth, but some of the councillors and officials stated that the spokesman was wrong and that cooperation was possible at the present time.

What was the spokesman trying to communicate by means of the myth? Discussion with him, and with the other officials and councillors, made it clear that he was making, and they understood him to be making, the following points:

1. That he was opposed to any attempt at cooperation with the employers because he believed that cooperation between employers and employed was not possible.