
**Communication: Definitions and Concepts**

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The Latin root of “communication” – *communicare* – means “to share” or “to be in relation with.” Through Indo-European etymological roots, it further relates to the words “common,” “commune,” and “community,” suggesting an act of “bringing together” (→ Communication: History of the Idea).

The notion of communication has been present and debated in the west from pre-Socratic times. The Hippocratic Corpus, for example, is a list of symptoms and diseases; it discusses ways of “bringing together” the signs of a disease or ailment with the disease itself for the purposes of diagnosis and prognosis.

**COMMUNICATION AS PROCESS AND COMMUNICATION AS PRODUCT**

In the west, classic works of Greek philosophy set much of the agenda for understanding communication (Peters 1999, 36–50). Emerging from a society in the transition from oral to literate modes, these works figured communication as a process bringing together humans to consider a shared reality through the word. Like many societies, early Greece was characterized by orality: communication by means of the voice, without the technology of writing. Oral communication, because it could not store information in the same ways and amounts as writing, evolved mnemonic, often poetic, devices to pass on traditions and cultural practices. Narrative, for example, developed as a form of communication in which facts were figured as stories of human action to be retold in relatively small public gatherings of people. Communication, in this formulation, was necessarily a locally situated process.

The development of literate societies involved communication resulting in a “product” to be stored, distributed, and used as a reference for scientific analysis, critique, and political organization. Written communication is originally thought to have developed as a means of keeping a record of economic transactions. In other spheres, it allowed the storage of large amounts of information and the recording of abstract, scientific principles. Furthermore, written communication was also to be used for the reification of cultural and religious traditions. Writing wrought a transformation in the experience of
space and time: in contrast to oral messages, a communication in writing could be accessed at a later date than its composition; it could also be consumed in private. In tandem with these transformations, written communication facilitated scientific thought and the growth of technology, providing a means of knowledge storage that far surpassed, in its capacity for detail and complexity, that of oral memory.

**SOCIAL USES OF COMMUNICATION**

Communication could be understood originally as a *repository of tradition*. In pre-print Europe, the protection of religious tradition was partnered by the preservation of writing, enshrining the “Original Word” for the purposes of instruction. Before Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, writing was the preserve of monasteries, the locations in which scriptures were copied out longhand. Latin writers from Augustine to Aquinas, through exegesis of such manuscripts, also meditated on the relation between signs and referents.

Following the introduction of print, communication became a key *symbolic resource* for social change. In the centuries after 1450, Europe experienced major transformations of social life in which communication played a central role. Print facilitated widespread communication of messages that might be deemed educational or seditious, ultimately enabling confrontation (as in the Reformation) as well as specialization (sciences building on the Renaissance). As a result of a series of legal and constitutional changes across Europe in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, print experienced a boom. Booksellers grew in number; the growth of magazines, periodicals, newspapers, and other printed materials also aided literacy, whether in schools or when taken up privately by the self-taught citizen. Print promoted a more private, individual communication centered on the self. Yet, through its reach to a large audience, it also allowed public life in Europe to prosper.

In the modern era, communication served as a *common denominator of public life*. The activities of public life in Europe developed into what → Habermas (1989) calls the (bourgeois) → *public sphere*. This sphere, derived from the meetings of the mercantile class – burghers and others – for talk and debate, was attendant on the eighteenth-century growth of coffee houses in Britain and the German-speaking lands and, in France, of the salons. As Habermas shows, coffee-house talk was driven by the content of printed periodicals and mainly oriented toward questions of literature and culture, even above politics. It was divorced from the family and the intimate sphere, and simultaneously extraneous to the relations of production, commerce, and business. The discourse of the public sphere could be considered political in quite a “pure” sense, a “rational” communication, enabling self-governance and self-reflection, not simply dictated by, or the epiphenomenon of, the accumulation of capital.

Among the educated classes in eighteenth-century Europe, oral communication assumed an importance that arguably surpasses that of the present-day western world of mobile telephony and wireless connection. Just as periodical content fueled oral communication, the content of conversation was frequently, in turn, reproduced and disseminated in periodicals. The “public sphere thesis” is important for understanding communication as a socio-historical phenomenon in that it exemplifies, first, the ways in
which social entities are brought together (in this case, members of a particular literate class) and, second, the way communication has long been simultaneously interpersonal in the flesh and technologically mediated.

**TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONCEPTS OF COMMUNICATION IN THE WEST**

A full-fledged “communication theory” emerged in the twentieth century (→ Communication and Media Studies, History to 1968) and was, not coincidentally, intimately linked to investigations of “togetherness” in a number of different fields. Among these investigations were those of American sociology (the Chicago School) and the written accounts of Anglophone anthropology (especially, Malinowski, Boas, and Sapir), which, along with assessments of the idea of “community” (for example, Tönnies), attempted to present a comprehensive vision of how communication is constituted. After these early milestones in the development of the human and social sciences, progress was accelerated in the 1920s by a series of studies into specific aspects of modern communication and communication as a general phenomenon (Peters 1999). New technologies of communication during the period stimulated the broadening of the understanding of communication. Photography, in various forms, had proliferated since 1839; film, from the mid-1890s, had become an important new medium of information and entertainment (→ Photography; Film as Popular Culture); and → radio, above all, became the defining medium in which communication by one to many – broadcasting, or mass communication – could take place without listeners having to even leave their homes.

Radio was an intensely public medium of communication and stimulated worries about its potential uses in bringing people together through propaganda. The period from the 1920s to the late 1940s, a period dominated by the use of radio for propagandizing purposes by the Nazis and the fascists in Europe, featured a renewal and expansion of the understanding of communication by intellectuals. Political scientists and theorists of the “public” (for example, → Lippmann, Bernays, Schmitt, → Lasswell) were aligned with “administrative researchers” (for example, → Lazarsfeld, Berelson) who carried out industry-funded studies of (usually) media audiences, who were being redefined as key players in public communication.

The understanding of communication in this period generally proceeded from the flow of

\[\text{Sender} \rightarrow \text{Message} \rightarrow \text{Receiver}\]

The message requires encoding and decoding, indicating that it is not a perfect, transparent vehicle for → “meaning”: it mediates meaning as a result of being in a channel, even if the concept of mediation is given a variety of definitions across the human, social, and technical sciences (→ Media). Lasswell (1948) presupposed that communication has “effects” on the receiver in the formula “Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect,” an assumption shared by the early Payne Fund studies of movies in 1930s America. The work of Lasswell and others represented a “scientific,” de-personalized understanding of communication, which was taken further in an “objective” account of communication by researchers in cybernetics from the late
1940s. Producing *models of communication*, their work exemplifies the concept of
communication as both product and process.

For Shannon and Weaver (1949), on the one hand, an information source in the model,
with a message, uses a transmitter to produce a signal, which is received, by a receiver,
which delivers a concomitant message to a destination. At the interface of the sent signal
and the received signal is likely to be “noise.” Such “noise” might corrupt the implicit
integrity of the message as a product during the process of transmission, the prime
example being several conflicting signals in the same channel at once. On the other hand,
→ Gerbner’s 1956 model and the 1957 model of Westley and MacLean attempted to
unravel the process of communication to determine how elements and their combination
might be susceptible to misunderstanding.

In the second half of the twentieth century, further advances in the technology of
communication invited a specific focus on media to explicate what communication is. All
communication is mediated by virtue of the fact that telepathy for humans and direct
messages for other organisms have not been achieved. Radio was supplemented,
especially after the 1950s, by television, a powerful medium of mass communication,
allowing the flow not only of aural messages, but of images, as well, into the domestic
environment. “Medium theorists,” observing such developments, stressed that media are,
in the phrase made famous by the Canadian communication theorist → Marshall
McLuhan, “extensions” of humans. Like tools, media extend the capabilities of humans to
reach out into a broader world of communication and interaction. However, as a
corollary of this, the media transform humans’ apprehension of the world and produce a
consciousness that is tied to particular modes of communication, for example, orality and
literacy. For medium theorists → Innis, McLuhan, Havelock, Ong, Meyrowitz, Postman,
Levinson, et al., all the major media of communication have entailed “paradigm shift[s] in
cultural evolution” (Danesi 2002, 15).

*Medium theory* assumed a much different “effect” of communication in audiences than
Lasswell and other early social-scientific communication theorists (→ Medium Theory).
Also, later social-scientific theories of communication that have been skeptical about
direct effects, such as → uses-and-gratifications approaches since the 1940s, have found
that audiences utilize communications media in ways that do not result in linear effects.
In a parallel development, Lazarsfeld and colleagues put forward the idea of a → two-step
flow of communication. This replaced the image of the audience as a set of unconnected
individuals with, instead, a theory of → opinion leaders who, having been exposed to
media, will circulate messages from the media and, hence, disseminate influence on a
local basis (Katz 1957). This idea replayed the concept of communication as a symbolic
resource. In a summary assessment of contemporary audience research, sociologist
Joseph Klapper (1960) stressed the minimal effects of mass communication,
conceptualizing communication instead, in a weak sense, as a common denominator of
public life. Klapper’s review suggested that exposure to the large amounts of mass
communication that have been characteristic of modernity was more likely to reinforce
existing attitudes than to make receivers adopt new ones.

By the early 1980s, televisual communication, having established itself in western
homes, was supplemented by video cassette recorders, which potentially offered greater
autonomy to viewers through the capacity to “timeshift.” Research demonstrated that
Communication viewers were not necessarily behaving as expected; indeed, television sets that had been turned on in homes were sometimes found to be totally ignored. Timeshift allowed viewers to receive more televisual communication, repeatedly if chosen, and at times different to those of the original broadcast, by being active media users. Research during this period (Communication and Media Studies, History since 1968) emphasized other aspects of “the active audience” as well, recapitulating lessons from the uses-and-gratifications approaches, although often in a more critical perspective (for example, Morley 1980; Hobson 1982) (Critical Theory; Cultural Studies). The audience was found to be the locus of attitudes, values, experiences – ideological baggage that is brought to the act of decoding. As a result, audience members could be seen to actively and immediately reshape the communications they received, thoroughly transforming them in a manner that tended to invalidate the idea of an encoded message that is decoded by a receiver. Audiences do not simply decode, but “make” or, at least, “remake” communication. In this perspective, communication as “bringing together” implies not just that communities are built through communication, but also that communication is accomplished in and through the “interpretive communities” of communicators.

Twentieth-century technologies re-fashioned the way in which communication was carried out and, accordingly, prompted revisions of the way in which it was to be theorized. Computers entailed a “digitizing” of communication (Digitization and Media Convergence), despite the persistence of naturalized, analog graphic user interfaces remediating previous media forms (Remediation). The use of computers for Internet access, along with the implementation of hypertext links, created the potential for non-linear as well as many-to-many communication, summed up as interactivity (Interactivity, Concept of). Some traditional aspects of face-to-face communication were revamped through the “time-space compression,” which allowed global communication to take place instantaneously (email, video conferencing, mobile telephony, and so forth). The proliferation of digital and converged communication technologies seems to suggest that there is more opportunity for humans to communicate with growing numbers of humans than ever before. Yet the profusion of technologies that enables global communication evinces a fundamental imbalance between those who can afford converged technologies and those who cannot. This presents political issues of who may not be “brought together” in communication; it also raises theoretical issues of how communication may be conceptualized with due consideration to the cultural specificity of the concepts of communication and cognition.

COMMUNICATION BEYOND INDIVIDUAL COGNITION

As Kim (2002) argued, much western communication theory is underpinned by notions of an individualistic self, despite the fact that 70 percent of the world’s population is characterized by cultures of “collectivism” or “interdependence.” Not only have western concepts of communication been grounded in the self rather than “selves”; they have also assumed that communication is the preserve of sapient, cognizing participants.

A non-individualistic conceptualization of communication has been offered by semiotics. Based on pre-Socratic principles, semiotics has been taken up in the study of animal communication as well as in media studies. Semiotics sheds light on communication
because of its focus on signs as signs, whether they are part of communication in films or novels, the expressions of animals, or the messages that pass between organisms or cells. The nonverbal signs that are exchanged between animals can be said to actually communicate, as do the verbal and nonverbal signs passed between humans. The nonverbal signs that occur in components of organisms or plants also communicate. The concept of intrahuman and interspecies – as well as interhuman – message transfer amounts to a major reorientation of the understanding of communication, one in which human affairs constitute only a small part of communication in general.

**COMMUNICATION AND NONCOMMUNICATION**

Definitions of communication often assume successful contact and interaction. Yet the importance of noncommunication (or miscommunication) in understanding what communication is should not be underestimated. This includes ambiguity, misunderstanding, lying, cheating, deception, and unconscious and willful self-deception.

The famous case of “Clever Hans,” involving a horse whose abilities “proved” that animals could think and speak, but which in fact was responding to a number of nonverbal cues emitted by its “interlocutor,” illustrates well the vicissitudes of communication (Sebeok and Rosenthal 1981). Similarly, the overvaluing of verbal communication has tended to encourage neglect of nonverbal communication, a fact well understood by magicians and others practiced in deception. Lying is also central to communication, particularly as lies are often necessary to the project of human interaction (Ekman 2001). Nor is this exclusively a matter of human communication. In the animal world, too, lying is widespread (Sebeok 1986). Indeed, the reliance of communication on signs to substitute for something else that “does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment that a sign stands in for it” (Eco 1976, 7) suggests the fraternity of communication with lying.


**References and Suggested Readings**


Communication Education, Goals of

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Because the ability to communicate is considered a major – perhaps even the primary – defining characteristic of humanity, people assume that, throughout human history, elders have taught the young this essential survival skill. Despite agreement on the importance of learning to communicate, there is no consensus about the particular goals of communication education or even about how people learn. People in many parts of the world and for long stretches of history have assumed that communicative competence emerges almost naturally through innate predispositions and imitation. In other cultural and historical settings, communication abilities have been fostered through informal forms of coaching or apprenticeships that were specific to the context of use. Yet others have believed that communication skills and knowledge were subjects that could and should be taught formally or at least explicitly in educational institutions.

The term “communication education” generally applies to these structured curricula. Discussions of the goals for teaching communication in schools center on the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of the enterprise. From whatever goals are established, educators derive their specific instructional objectives, standards, and implicit or explicit pedagogies. Although multiple goals are present in most educational settings, the four following categories of goals represent distinct rationales for teaching communication.