

Communication

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Communication has a number of senses. The oldest is perhaps the action of imparting “things material,” which dates back to the C14. While this sense has become rare, it was extended in the C17 to the broader notion of “access or means of access between two or more persons or places; the action or faculty of passing from one place to another” or of “a line of connexion, connecting passage or opening.” It is here that we can see the long and close relationship of communication to what we would today call transportation.

In the C15, “communication” was extended to the facts or information that were imparted, what we might today call the content of communication. The most common modern sense of “communication,” which refers to the activity of imparting, or transmitting messages containing, information, ideas, or knowledge, dates back to the IC17. As early as the C15, a second sense stressed not so much the transmission of messages, or their content, but rather the activity of dialogue, interaction, and intercourse – as in the idea of conversation or **interpersonal communication** (and even of sexual intercourse by the C18).

As early as the C17, communication also had another, more participatory sense. Here it referred to a common participation or a shared quality or affinity, as in the Christian **communion**. This is strongly present in the contemporary American English usage, where a speaker may preface their remarks by saying that they wish to “share something” with their hearer or audience. A further sense focuses on the idea of communication as, potentially, a process of “making common to many” a particular set of ideas or experiences. This sense has some part of its roots in the religious idea of “communion” as a participatory process. Here we also begin to see some of the links between ideas of communication and ideas of community, which I will explore below.

There is another important sense of the word which focuses on the technical medium through which communication is conducted. This usage may refer either to the **media of symbolic communication** (language, signs, images – and the technologies by means of which they are often transmitted) or to the **means of physical communication** (roads, canals, railways, ships, airplanes). The historical changes in the relation of modes of symbolic communication to modes of physical transport are a key issue here. The moment when **symbolic communications** became distinct from modes of transport is perhaps best symbolized by the invention of the telegraph, with its capacity to send electronic messages, immediately, over long distances. This development marks a crucial historical shift in the role and function of these two distinct senses of “communication.” This sense of historical transformation is paralleled historically both by the debates which surrounded the rise of the mass media of the IC19 and eC20, and by contemporary debates about the significance of the “new media” of the digital/computer age, which are now held to be transforming human communication in fundamental ways.

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The study of communication in the IC20 was to a large extent informed by a rather restricted sense of the term, which focused on the factors determining the efficient transmission of information from sender to receiver. Early models of **mass communication** were concerned with how best to achieve the unimpeded transmission of messages between sender and receiver. This approach limited the definition of communication to the purposive transmission of explicit units of information, and conceived of the process in rather mechanistic terms. In the field of interpersonal communication, the limits of this model were perceived by many working in the field of social psychology, who argued for a broader definition, which would also include non-intentional forms of communication (including factors such as what came to be called body language). Their critique was based on the premise that in fact it is impossible (as a matter of principle) not to communicate, whether or not the person concerned consciously wishes to do so (the minimal communication would be that they were feeling non-communicative).

In the broader field of **communications and cultural studies**, this conventional model also came in for significant criticism and development, under the influence of semiology, with its focus on the linguistic and cultural "codes" underlying all acts of communication, and its guiding principle that there can be "no message without a code." The "encoding/decoding" model of communication has been particularly influential in this respect. That model, developed by Stuart Hall (1981), was also influential in shifting attention beyond the merely denotative (or "manifest") level of information which might be conveyed in a message, to the levels of connotative (implied, associative, or "latent") meaning which are routinely carried "on the back of" the seemingly simple units of explicit information which a message might convey. This approach drew on the structuralist model of linguistics to argue that a broad range of cultural codes (in imagery, dress, fashion, and style) could also usefully be studied on the model of language.

Previous models had tended to treat "successful communication" as the normal state of affairs, and had only been concerned with "misunderstandings" as exceptional disruptions in the flow of communications, which needed to be "ironed out." However, the semiological perspective encouraged the questioning of this assumption of the transparency of "normal" communications. Given that the existence of social and cultural divisions in most societies means that the senders and receivers of messages are unlikely to entirely share communicative codes, this new approach treated the variable interpretation of messages as both "normal" and the key research issue to be addressed

Here the issue of power in the fields of communication and culture also came into focus more clearly. This issue had been earlier highlighted by the shift of attention from interpersonal (two-way/dialogic) modes of communication to mass forms of one-way transmission of messages, from the elite groups who controlled the media to large audiences of receivers. The key question here was the manipulative power of mass media discourses (such as political propaganda or commercial advertising) to shape public opinion. The discussion of **mass communications** thus came to be defined as the study of who says what, in which

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channel, to whom, with what effect. Clearly this approach is informed by an evaluative perspective which poses two-way dialogue as the egalitarian form of what Jürgen Habermas (1970) calls the "ideal speech situation," and is correspondingly concerned with the extent to which mass forms of communication pervert this norm. Evidently, contemporary forms of interactive media, which are held to re-empower the audience, and thus to restore a more democratic mode of dialogue between the senders and receivers of messages, are important here. The issue at stake then concerns the extent to which, for example, television programs which encourage their viewers to ring in and vote on potential plot developments constitute genuine forms of democratic dialogue, or merely its simulation.

However, this focus on the question of who has power over the transmission of information, and how adequately the system allows feedback, is only one dimension of the issue of communication. In relation to the participatory sense of "communication," it is important to note the connection between the terms "communication" and "community," and the role of the former in the very constitution of the latter. Here we also return to the connection with ideas of communion. The key point here is to recognize that a community is not an entity that exists and then happens to communicate. Rather, communities are best understood as constituted in and through their changing patterns of communication. Indeed, today, as new technologies enable cheap and immediate forms of **long-distance communication**, the nuclear family is often strung out along the phone wires, and community is no longer necessarily founded on geographical contiguity. This approach also highlights Roman Jakobson's (1972) idea of the importance of the phatic dimension of communication in "keeping channels open" and connecting people together, rather than in the transmission of information. More fundamentally, to take this perspective is also to grant communications a primary – and constitutive – role in social affairs, rather than to see it as some merely secondary or subsidiary phenomenon.

From another perspective, many have argued that the **communications industries** themselves are increasingly central to our postmodern or late modern era. In so far as the defining characteristic of this era is held to be the compression of time and space, and the "transcendence" of geography enabled by the **new communications technologies**, these industries are central to that transformation. They are also increasingly central to the economies of the advanced societies of the world, which are now primarily based on the production and transfer of knowledge and information, rather than the manufacture of material goods. It is not for nothing that **communication skills** are now an increasingly important qualification for employment in these societies, and the absence of the relevant forms of verbal, literacy, or computer skills is enough to consign many of their poorer members to a position of social exclusion.

One could say that ours is an era which is now obsessed with the idea (or perhaps even the ideology) of communication. Telecommunication's advertising campaigns tell us that it is "good to talk"; "talk shows" featuring "ordinary people" dominate the world of daytime television; and mobile phone companies reassure us that we can "take our

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network with us, wherever we go," so as never to be "out of touch" with our families and friends. In all of this it is crucial to distinguish between technical improvements in the speed or efficiency of the means of communication and the growth of understanding in human affairs.

David Morley

See: ***COMMUNITY, INFORMATION, MASS, MEDIA.***