

## ON DEFINING COMMUNICATION: STILL ANOTHER VIEW

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Even the most reluctant scholars and researchers in the academic field of communications find it increasingly difficult to avoid defining their business, if only for the purpose of explaining it to others. Communicating among scholars of communication also requires some common conceptions of the field, and some consistency in the use of key terms.<sup>1</sup> The question can no longer be sidestepped by saying that we should just get on with significant work on important problems, and leave definitions to pedants. The implicit agreements of small groups at a few schools no longer suffice. Donald P. Ely found 20 universities offering communications programs of some sort in 1960. [1] Eleanor Blum listed at least 18 formal university research organizations in the communications field. [2] The Penn State team looked at 14 interdisciplinary programs on the graduate level only. [3] David Manning White's survey of research on a broad front, [4] and the most recent inventory of behavioral-science oriented research of the last decade, [5] reveal vigorous activity of increasing scope and intensity.

In the limelight of growing attention, and in light of a diversity of approaches, these newer forms of academic organization and activity are called upon, quite legitimately, to demonstrate a rationale never demanded of the old. The choice of problems for study and research, the allocation of resources, and the assessment of the relevance of contributions, depend on definitions. The continued viability of communications programs and the emergence of a recognizable field require efforts to identify a distinct problem area and center of intellectual concern.

The need to define, and the effort to strive for some integration amidst diversity, bring with them the temptation to talk of the best approach to a problem before agreement is achieved as

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<sup>1</sup> As a contribution to that end, and to explain my own usage of the term, let me suggest that "communication" (singular) be used in reference to (1) the act, and (2) the process, and "communications" (plural) in reference to (1) means, channels, media, and (2) programs, schools, and the field itself embracing a multiplicity of meanings.

to the problem to be solved. There is danger of seizing on the most convenient, and the most easily manageable, measurable, and fundable activities as being of the highest priority. These dangers, as I perceive them, are inherent in attempts to reduce communications study and research to an intelligence operation on behalf of any and all attempts to change behavior. I would like to argue that such a conception inhibits a workable definition of communication as a distinct from of social interaction, perpetuates the underlying confusion between effects and behavior change, and fails to do justice to the seminal contribution the study of communications can make to understanding some basic problems of life.

#### *The tactical approach*

At the heart of the main line of inquiry in communications which was, according to Berelson, "playing out" in the 1950's, [6] lay the explicit or implicit preoccupation with the tactics of power, persuasion, and manipulation. Correspondingly, there was a preference for research techniques which could yield "hard" and quick information for immediate administrative uses.

The tactical line of inquiry has made its contribution to our understanding of the mechanics of certain communication effects, uses, and gratifications. These insights, and their apparent applicability to a great variety of policy and management problems, gave rise to a great deal of research activity which undoubtedly will, and should, continue. But practical and theoretical limitations make it difficult to conceive of such study as the basic source of definitions and rationales for the field.

One reason for the "playing out" of the approach, even if not the activity, is that insight into the tactics of "making friends and influencing people" has limited significance for basic policy-making. The stake and role of an institution in the social order defines the total perspective in which it will view alternative policies. No institution will shrink from taking an "unpopular" decision when its vital interests are involved. Tactical intelligence will be called upon mainly to find the most suitable ways of "selling" (or disguising) policies which serve institutional objectives.

More crucial are the limitations the primarily tactical approach imposes on theory. Some of these limitations are inherent in approaching communications from a point of view which, as an historical phenomenon, is itself rooted in manipulative pressures of modern society. A recent formulation, prepared under a grant from an advertising agency, characteristically defined the study of communication as "the study of ways of arranging stimuli to produce desired responses by the organism." [7] This conception not only fails to define communication but defines it out of existence. It blurs the distinction between communication and other types of social interaction. The researcher might as well study pushing, pulling, shoving, or feeding, or any tactics intending to "produce desired responses." It becomes irrelevant whether or not the transaction involves communication. What really happens as a consequence of "arranging stimuli" is also secondary. The basic question is: did the tactic "produce desired responses," or did it not? As Dell Hymes pointed out, "To define communication as the triggering of a response . . . is to make the term so nearly equivalent to behavior and interaction in general as to lose its specific value as a scientific and moral conception." [8] Another theoretical difficulty is that the approach can, at best, yield a long and unwieldy list of "do's and don't" which must then be related to an almost infinite range of situations and objectives.

Attaching the criterion of intentionality does not help to clarify matters. If the interaction involves a code or representation with recognized message properties, and if the nature and role of these properties in the interaction is the focus of the study, we are inquiring into a communication act which has consequences. To reduce the range of observation to those acts, aspects, or consequences which may have been "intended" as parts of a conscious communication effort is to place blinders on the researcher. The criterion would serve primarily those interested in measuring "effectiveness" by their own preconceived yardstick of intentions; it would inhibit inquiry into all aspects and consequences of communication, wherever such inquiry might lead.

*"Effects" or "Change?"*

Underlying the confusion of the study of communications with that of assorted tactics has been the excessive concern with

usually short-term, private, and personal effects, conceived as behavior change—such as the adoption of a new practice, the gaining of a vote, the sale of a new product. This preoccupation has obscured not only the concept of communication as a special type of social interaction, but also the meaning of effect. Equating effect with change tended to inhibit investigation of the massive historical and structural connections between communication behavior, the nature and composition of message systems, and corresponding system of social relations. What could be observed, and was indeed seized upon as something surprising and significant, was the complexity and difficulty of *changing* certain ideas and behavior patterns amidst generally unchanging social-cultural conditions. Such findings of complexity and difficulty were summarized in Klapper's comprehensive survey. [9] But Klapper himself noted that much "effects" research may be inapplicable and misleading in regards to crucial issues and broader areas of influence upon life, thought, and values.

An image (or behavior pattern) must be sustained to exist at all. Once a pattern is established and sustained, it affects messages and tactics as much as (or more than) the other way around. Specific attitude or behavior "change" may be the *least* significant indicator of "effect" unless it is part of a general transformation of the message-production and image-cultivation process, and is, therefore, supported and reinforced by changing circumstances of life.

The cultivation of dominant image patterns is the major function of the dominant communication agencies of any society. There is significant change in that process when there is a change in the clientele, position, or outlook of the dominant agencies of communication. Such change, when it occurs, changes the *relative meaning* of existing images and behavior patterns even before it changes the patterns themselves. The history and dynamics of continuities, as well as of change, in the reciprocal relationships between social structures, message systems, and image structures *are* the "effects" of communication.

#### *Field Is Where The Problems Are*

Communication is social interaction through *symbols and message systems*. The production and perception of message systems cultivating stable structures of generalized images—

rather than any tactic calculated to result in "desirable" (or any other) response—is at the heart of the communications transaction. Any definition or approach short-circuiting the distinguishing features of communication itself has no prospect of designating it as a recognizable field of study.

Social scientists in communication need to isolate and define something distinct and common about their work, but they also need to avoid the temptation of settling for the most convenient and salable service functions. The problems to be solved require fuller understanding of the types of message systems that tend to be produced under different cultural, institutional, and technological conditions; of the ways in which the composition of message systems tends to structure and weight issues and choices from the interpersonal to the international level; and of the ways in which information is processed, transmitted, and integrated into given frameworks of knowledge. Students of communication should not shrink from defining their field where the problems of communication are, rather than where solutions might be easiest to find.

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