

communication

 Encyclopædia Britannica Article

the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols. The subject of communication has concerned scholars since the time of ancient Greece. Until modern times, however, the topic was usually subsumed under other disciplines and taken for granted as a natural process inherent to each. In 1928 the English literary critic and author I.A. Richards offered one of the first—and in some ways still the best—definitions of communication as a discrete aspect of human enterprise:

Communication takes place when one mind so acts upon its environment that another mind is influenced, and in that other mind an experience occurs which is like the experience in the first mind, and is caused in part by that experience.

Richards' definition is both general and rough, but its application to nearly all kinds of communication—including those between humans and animals (but excluding machines)—separated the contents of messages from the processes in human affairs by which these messages are transmitted. More recently, questions have been raised concerning the adequacy of any single definition of the term communication as it is currently employed. The American psychiatrist and scholar Jurgen Ruesch has identified 40 varieties of disciplinary approaches to the subject, including architectural, anthropological, psychological, political, and many other interpretations of the apparently simple interaction described by Richards. In total, if such informal communications as sexual attraction and play behaviour are included, there exist at least 50 modes of interpersonal communication that draw upon dozens of discrete intellectual disciplines and analytic approaches. Communication may therefore be analyzed in at least 50 different ways.

Interest in communication has been stimulated by advances in science and technology, which, by their nature, have called attention to man as a communicating creature. Among the first and most dramatic examples of the inventions resulting from technological ingenuity were the telegraph and telephone, followed by others like wireless radio and telephoto devices. The development of popular newspapers and periodicals, broadcasting, motion pictures, and television led to institutional and cultural innovations that permitted efficient and rapid communication between a few individuals and large populations; these media have been responsible for the rise and social power of the new

phenomenon of mass communication. (See also information theory; information processing; telecommunication system.)

Since about 1920 the growth and apparent influence of communications technology have attracted the attention of many specialists who have attempted to isolate communication as a specific facet of their particular interest. Psychologists, in their studies of behaviour and mind, have evolved concepts of communication useful to their investigations as well as to certain forms of therapy. Social scientists have identified various forms of communication by which myths, styles of living, mores, and traditions are passed either from generation to generation or from one segment of society to another. Political scientists and economists have recognized that communication of many types lies at the heart of the regularities in the social order. Under the impetus of new technology—particularly high-speed computers—mathematicians and engineers have tried to quantify and measure components of communicated information and to develop methods for translating various types of messages into quantities or amounts amenable to both their procedures and instruments. Numerous and differently phrased questions have been posed by artists, architects, artisans, writers, and others concerning the overall influences of various types of communication. Many researchers, working within the relevant concerns of their disciplines, have also sought possible theories or laws of cause and effect to explain the ways in which human dispositions are affected by certain kinds of communication under certain circumstances, and the reasons for the change.

In the 1960s a Canadian educator, Marshall McLuhan, drew the threads of interest in the field of communication into a view that associated many contemporary psychological and sociological phenomena with the media employed in modern culture. McLuhan's often repeated idea, "the medium is the message," stimulated numerous filmmakers, photographers, artists, and others, who adopted McLuhan's view that contemporary society had moved (or was moving) from a "print" culture to a "visual" one. The particular forms of greatest interest to McLuhan and his followers were those associated with the sophisticated technological instruments for which young people in particular display enthusiasm, namely motion pictures, television, and sound recordings.

By the late 20th century the main focus of interest in communication seemed to be drifting away from McLuhanism and to be centring upon: (1) the mass communication industries, the people who run them, and the effects they have upon their audiences; (2) persuasive communication and the use of technology to influence dispositions; (3) processes of interpersonal communication as mediators of information; (4) dynamics of verbal and nonverbal (and perhaps

extrasensory) communication between individuals; (5) perception of different kinds of communications; (6) uses of communication technology for social and artistic purposes, including education in and out of school; and (7) development of relevant criticism for artistic endeavours employing modern communications technology.

In short, a communication expert may be oriented to any of a number of disciplines in a field of inquiry that has, as yet, neither drawn for itself a conclusive roster of subject matter nor agreed upon specific methodologies of analysis.

Models of communication

Fragmentation and problems of interdisciplinary outlook have generated a wide range of discussion concerning the ways in which communication occurs and the processes it entails. Most speculation on these matters admits, in one way or another, that the communication theorist's task is to answer as clearly as possible the question, "*Who says what to whom with what effect?*" (This query was originally posed by the U.S. political scientist Harold D. Lasswell.) Obviously, all of the critical elements in this question may be interpreted differently by scholars and writers in different disciplines.

Linear models

One of the most productive schematic models of a communications system that has been proposed as an answer to Lasswell's question emerged in the late 1940s, largely from the speculations of two U.S. mathematicians, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. The simplicity of their model, its clarity, and its surface generality proved attractive to many students of communication in a number of disciplines, although it is neither the only model of the communication process extant nor is it universally accepted. As originally conceived, the model contained five elements—an information source, a transmitter, a channel of transmission, a receiver, and a destination—all arranged in linear order. Messages (electronic messages, initially) were supposed to travel along this path, to be changed into electric energy by the transmitter, and to be reconstituted into intelligible language by the receiver. In time, the five elements of the model were renamed so as to specify components for other types of communication transmitted in various manners. The information source was split into its components (both source and message) to provide a wider range of applicability. The six constituents of the revised model are: (1) a source, (2) an encoder, (3) a message, (4) a channel, (5) a decoder, and (6) a receiver. For some communication systems, the components are as simple to specify as, for instance, (1) a man on the telephone, (2) the mouthpiece of the telephone, (3) the words the man speaks, (4)

the electrical wires along which the words (now electrical impulses) travel, (5) the earpiece of another telephone, and (6) the mind of the listener. In other communication systems, the components are more difficult to isolate; *e.g.*, the communication of the emotions of a fine artist by means of a painting to people who may respond to the message long after the artist's death.

Begging a multitude of psychological, aesthetic, and sociological questions concerning the exact nature of each component, the linear model appeared, from the commonsense perspective, at least, to explain in general terms the ways in which certain classes of communication occurred. It did not indicate the reason for the inability of certain communications—obvious in daily life—to fit its neat paradigm.

Entropy, negative entropy, and redundancy

Another concept, first called by Shannon a “noise source” but later associated with the notion of entropy (a principle derived from physics), was imposed upon the communication model. Entropy is analogous in most communication to audio or visual static—that is, to outside influences that diminish the integrity of the communication and, possibly, distort the message for the receiver. Negative entropy may also occur in instances in which incomplete or blurred messages are nevertheless received intact, either because of the ability of the receiver to fill in missing details or to recognize, despite distortion or a paucity of information, both the intent and content of the communication.

Although rarely shown on diagrammatic models of this version of the communication process, redundancy—the repetition of elements within a message that prevents the failure of communication of information—is the greatest antidote to entropy. Most written and spoken languages, for example, are roughly half-redundant. If 50 percent of the words of this article were taken away at random, there would still remain an intelligible—although somewhat peculiar—essay. Similarly, if one-half of the words of a radio news commentator are heard, the broadcast can usually be understood. Redundancy is apparently involved in most human activities, and, because it helps to overcome the various forms of entropy that tend to turn intelligible messages into unintelligible ones (including psychological entropy on the part of the receiver), it is an indispensable element for effective communication.

Messages are therefore susceptible to considerable modification and mediation. Entropy distorts, while negative entropy and redundancy clarify; as each occurs differentially in the communication process, the chances of the message being received and correctly understood vary. Still, the process (and the model of it) remains conceptually

static, because it is fundamentally concerned with messages sent from point to point, and not with their results or possible influences upon sender and receiver.

Feedback

To correct this flaw, the principle of feedback was added to the model and provided a closer approximation of interpersonal human interaction than was known theretofore. This construct was derived from the studies of Norbert Wiener, the so-called father of the science of cybernetics. Wiener's cybernetic models, some of which provide the basis for current computer technology, were designed to be responsive to their own behaviour; that is, they audited their own performances mathematically or electronically in order to avoid errors of entropy, unnecessary redundancy, or other simple hazards.

Certain types of common communications—Christmas cards, for instance—usually require little feedback. Others, particularly interactions between human beings in conversation, cannot function without the ability of the message sender to weigh and calculate the apparent effect of his words on his listener. It is largely the aspect of feedback that provides for this model the qualities of a process, because each instance of feedback conditions or alters the subsequent messages.

Dynamic models

Other models of communication processes have been constructed to meet the needs of students of communication whose interests differ from those of quantitatively oriented theorists like Shannon, Weaver, and Wiener. While the model described above displays some generality and shows simplicity, it lacks some of the predictive, descriptive, and analytic powers found in other approaches. A psychologist, Theodore M. Newcomb, for example, has articulated a more fluid system of dimensions to represent the individual interacting in his environment. Newcomb's model and others similar to it are not as precisely mathematical (quantitative) as Shannon's and thus permit more flexible accounts of human behaviour and its variable relationships. They do not deny the relevance of linear models to Shannon and Weaver's main concerns—quanta of information and the delivery of messages under controlled conditions—but they question their completeness and utility in describing cognitive, emotional, and artistic aspects of communication as they occur in socio-cultural matrices.

Students concerned mainly with persuasive and artistic communication often centre attention upon different kinds, or modes, of communication (*i.e.*, narrative, pictorial, and dramatic) and theorize that the messages they contain, including messages of

emotional quality and artistic content, are communicated in various manners to and from different sorts of people. For them, the stability and function of channel or medium are more variable and less mechanistically related to the process than they are for followers of Shannon and Weaver and psychologists like Newcomb. (McLuhan, indeed, asserts that the channel actually dictates, or severely influences, the message—both as sent and received.) Many analysts of communication, linguistic philosophers, and others are concerned with the nature of messages, particularly their compatibility with sense and emotion, their style, and the intentions behind them. They find both linear and geometric models of process of little interest to their concerns, although considerations related to these models, particularly those of entropy, redundancy, and feedback, have provided significant and productive concepts for most students of communication.

Applications of formal logic and mathematics

Despite the numerous types of communication or information theory extant today—and those likely to be formulated tomorrow—the most rationally and experimentally consistent approaches to communication theory so far developed follow the constructions of Shannon and others described above. Such approaches tend to employ the structural rigours of logic rather than the looser syntaxes, grammars, and vocabularies of common languages, with their symbolic, poetic, and inferential aspects of meaning.

Cybernetic theory and computer technology require rigorous but straightforward languages to permit translation into nonambiguous, special symbols that can be stored and utilized for statistical manipulations. The closed system of formal logic proved ideal for this need. Premises and conclusions drawn from syllogisms according to logical rules may be easily tested in a consistent, scientific manner, as long as all parties communicating share the rational premises employed by the particular system.

That this logical mode of communication drew its frame of discourse from the logic of the ancient Greeks was inevitable. Translated into an Aristotelian manner of discourse, meaningful interactions between individuals could be transferred to an equally rational closed system of mathematics: an arithmetic for simple transactions, an algebra for solving certain well-delimited puzzles, a calculus to simulate changes, rates and flows, and a geometry for purposes of illustration and model construction. This progression has proved quite useful for handling those limited classes of communications that arise out of certain structured, rational operations, like those in economics, inductively oriented sociology, experimental psychology, and other behavioral and social sciences, as well as in most of the natural sciences.

The basic theorem of information theory rests, first, upon the assumption that the message transmitted is well organized, consistent, and characterized by relatively low and determinable degrees of entropy and redundancy. (Otherwise, the mathematical structure might yield only probability statements approaching random scatters, of little use to anyone.) Under these circumstances, by devising proper coding procedures for the transmitter, it becomes possible to transmit symbols over a channel at an average rate that is nearly the capacity of units per second of the channel (symbolized by C) as a function of the units per second from an information source (H)—but never at rates in excess of capacity divided by units per second (C/H), no matter how expertly the symbols are coded. As simple as this notion seems, upon determining the capacity of the channel and by cleverly coding the information involved, precise mathematical models of information transactions (similar to electronic frequencies of energy transmissions) may be evolved and employed for complex analyses within the strictures of formal logic. They must, of course, take into account as precisely as possible levels of entropy and redundancy as well as other known variables.

The internal capacities of the channel studied and the sophistication of the coding procedures that handle the information limit the usefulness of the theorem presented above. At present such procedures, while they may theoretically offer broad prospects, are restricted by formal encoding procedures that depend upon the capacities of the instruments in which they are stored (nowadays, mostly on magnetic tape and disk-packs in computers). Although such devices can handle quickly the logic of vast amounts of relatively simple information, they cannot match the flexibility and complexity of the human brain, still man's prime instrument for managing the subtleties of most communication.

Types of communication

Nonvocal communication

Signals, signs, and symbols, three related components of communication processes found in all known cultures, have attracted considerable scholarly attention because they do not relate primarily to the usual conception of words or language. Each is apparently an increasingly more complex modification of the former, and each was probably developed in the depths of prehistory before, or at the start of, man's early experiments with vocal language.

Signals

A signal may be considered as an interruption in a field of constant

energy transfer. An example is the dots and dashes that open and close the electromagnetic field of a telegraph circuit. Such interruptions do not require the construction of a man-made field; interruptions in nature (*e.g.*, the tapping of a pencil in a silent room, or puffs of smoke rising from a mountain top) may produce the same result. The basic function of such signals is to provide the change of a single environmental factor in order to attract attention and to transfer meaning. A code system that refers interruptions to some form of meaningful language may easily be developed with a crude vocabulary of dots, dashes, or other elemental audio and visual articulations. Taken by themselves, the interruptions have a potential breadth of meaning that seems extremely small; they may indicate the presence of an individual in a room, his impatience, agreement, or disagreement with some aspect of his environment or, in the case of a scream for help, a critical situation demanding attention. Coded to refer to spoken or written language, their potential to communicate language is extremely great.

Signs

While signs are usually less germane to the development of words than signals, most of them contain greater amounts of meaning of and by themselves. Ashley Montagu, an anthropologist, has defined a sign as a “concrete denoter” possessing an inherent specific meaning, roughly analogous to the sentence “This is it; do something about it!” The most common signs encountered in daily life are pictures or drawings, although a human posture like a clenched fist, an outstretched arm, or a hand posed in a “Stop” gesture may also serve as signs. The main difference between a sign and a signal is that a sign (like a policeman’s badge) contains meanings of an intrinsic nature; a signal (like a scream for help) is merely a device by which one is able to formulate extrinsic meanings. Their difference is illustrated by the observation that many types of animals respond to signals, while only a few intelligent and trained animals (usually dogs and apes) are competent to respond even to simple signs.

All known cultures utilize signs to convey relatively simple messages swiftly and conveniently. Signs may depend for their meaning upon their form, setting, colour, or location. In the United States, traffic signs, uniforms, badges, and barber poles are frequently encountered signs. Taken en masse, any society’s lexicon of signs makes up a rich vocabulary of colourful communications.

Symbols

Symbols are more difficult than signs to understand and to define because, unlike signs and signals, they are intricately woven into an individual’s ongoing perceptions of the world. They appear to contain

a dimly understood capacity that (as one of their functions), in fact, defines the very reality of that world. The symbol has been defined as any device with which an abstraction can be made. Although far from being a precise construction, it leads in a profitable direction. The abstractions of the values that people imbue in other people and in things they own and use lie at the heart of symbolism. Here is a process, according to the British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, whereby

some components of [the mind's] experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions, and usages respecting other components of experience.

In Whitehead's opinion, symbols are analogues or metaphors (that may include written and spoken language as well as visual objects) standing for some quality of reality that is enhanced in importance or value by the process of symbolization itself.

Almost every society has evolved a symbol system whereby, at first glance, strange objects and odd types of behaviour appear to the outside observer to have irrational meanings and seem to evoke odd, unwarranted cognitions and emotions. Upon examination each symbol system reflects a specific cultural logic, and every symbol functions to communicate information between members of the culture in much the same way as, but in a more subtle manner than, conventional language. Although a symbol may take the form of as discrete an object as a wedding ring or a totem pole, symbols tend to appear in clusters and depend upon one another for their accretion of meaning and value. They are not a language of and by themselves; rather they are devices by which ideas too difficult, dangerous, or inconvenient to articulate in common language are transmitted between people who have acculturated in common ways. It does not appear possible to compile discrete vocabularies of symbols, because they lack the precision and regularities present in natural language that are necessary for explicit definitions.

Icons

Rich clusters of related and unrelated symbols are usually regarded as icons. They are actually groups of interactive symbols, like the White House in Washington, D.C., a funeral ceremony, or an Impressionist painting. Although in examples such as these, there is a tendency to isolate icons and individual symbols for examination, symbolic communication is so closely allied to all forms of human activity that it is generally and nonconsciously used and treated by most people as the most important aspect of communication in society. With the recognition that spoken and written words and numbers themselves constitute symbolic metaphors, their critical roles in the worlds of science, mathematics, literature, and art can

be understood. In addition, with these symbols, an individual is able to define his own identity.

Gestures

Professional actors and dancers have known since antiquity that body gestures may also generate a vocabulary of communication more or less unique to each culture. Some U.S. scholars have tried to develop a vocabulary of body language, called kinesics. The results of their investigations, both amusing and potentially practical, may eventually produce a genuine lexicon of American gestures similar to one prepared in detail by François Delsarte, a 19th-century French teacher of pantomime and gymnastics who described the ingenious and complex language of contemporary face and body positions for theatrical purposes.

Proxemics

Of more general, cross-cultural significance are the theories involved in the study of “proxemics” developed by a U.S. anthropologist, Edward Hall. Proxemics involves the ways in which people in various cultures utilize both time and space as well as body positions and other factors for purposes of communication. Hall’s “silent language” of nonverbal communications consists of such culturally determined interactions as the physical distance or closeness maintained between individuals, the body heat they give off, odours they perceive in social situations, angles of vision they maintain while talking, the pace of their behaviour, and the sense of time appropriate for communicating under differing conditions. By comparing matters like these in the behaviour of different social classes (and in varying relationships), Hall elaborated and codified a number of sophisticated general principles that demonstrate how certain kinds of nonverbal communication occur. Although Hall’s most impressive arguments are almost entirely empirical, and many of them are open to question, the study of proxemics does succeed in calling attention to major features of communication dynamics rarely considered by linguists and symbologists. Students of words have been more interested in objective formal vocabularies than in the more subtle means of discourse unknowingly acquired by the members of a culture.

Vocal communication

Significant differences between nonvocal and vocal communication are matters more of degree than of kind. Signs, signals, symbols, and possibly icons may, at times, be easily verbalized, although most people tend to think of them as visual means of expression. Kinesics and proxemics may also, in certain instances, involve vocalizations as accompaniments to nonverbal phenomena or as somehow integral

to them. Be they grunts, words, or sentences, their function is to help in forwarding a communication that is fundamentally nonverbal.

Although there is no shortage of speculation on the issue, the origins of human speech remain obscure at present. It is plausible that man is born with an instinct for speech. A phenomenon supporting this belief is the presence of unlearned cries and gurgles of infants operating as crude, vocal signs directed to others the baby cannot possibly be aware of. Some anthropologists claim that within the vocabularies of kinesics and proxemics are the virtual building blocks of spoken language; they postulate that primitive men made various and ingenious inventions (including speech) as a result of their need to communicate with others in order to pool their intellectual and physical resources. Other observers suggest similar origins of speech, including the vocalization of physical activity, imitation of the sounds of nature, and sheer serendipity. Scientific proof of any of these speculations is at present impossible.

Not only is the origin of speech disputed among experts but the precise reasons for the existence of the numerous languages of the world are also far from clear. In the 1920s, an American linguistic anthropologist, Edward Sapir, and, later Benjamin Lee Whorf, centred attention upon the various methods of expression found in different cultures. Drawing their evidence primarily from the languages of primitive societies, they made some very significant observations concerning spoken (and probably written) language. First, man's language reflects in subtle ways those matters of greatest relevance and importance to the value system of each particular culture. Thus, language may be said to reflect culture, or, in other words, people seem to find ways of saying what they need to say. A familiar illustration is the many words (or variations of words) that Eskimos use to describe whale blubber in its various states; *e.g.*, on the whale, ready to eat, raw, cooked, rancid. Another example is the observation that "drunk" possesses more synonyms than any other term in the English language. Apparently, this is the result of a psychological necessity to euphemize a somewhat nasty, uncomfortable, or taboo matter, a device also employed for other words that describe seemingly important, but improper, behaviour or facets of culture.

Adaptability of language

Other observations involve the discovery that any known language may be employed, without major modification, to say almost anything that may be said in any other language. A high degree of circumlocution and some nonverbal vocalization may be required to accomplish this end, but, no matter how alien the concept to the original language, it may be expressed clearly in the language of another culture. Students of linguistic anthropology have been able

to describe adequately in English esoteric linguistic propositions of primitive societies, just as it has been possible for anthropologists to describe details of Western technology to natives in remote cultures. Understood as an artifact of culture, spoken language may therefore be considered as a universal channel of communication into which various societies dip differentially in order to expedite and specify the numerous points of contact between individuals.

Language remains, however, a still partially understood phenomenon used to transact several types of discourse. Language has been classified on the basis of several criteria. One scheme established four categories on the basis of informative, dynamic, emotive, and aesthetic functions. Informative communication deals largely with narrative aspects of meaning; dynamic discourse concerns the transaction of dispositions such as opinions and attitudes; the emotive employment of language involves the evocation of feeling states in others in order to impel them to action; and aesthetic discourse, usually regarded as a poetic quality in speech, conveys stylistic aspects of expression.

Laughter

Although most vocal sounds other than words are usually considered prelinguistic language, the phenomenon of laughter as a form of communication is in a category by itself, with its closest relative being its apparent opposite, crying. Contemporary ethologists, like Konrad Lorenz, have attempted to associate laughter with group behaviour among animals in instances in which aggression is thwarted and laughlike phenomena seem to result among herds. Lorenz's metaphors, while apparently reasonable, cannot be verified inductively. They seem less reasonable to many than the more common notions of Freud and others that laughter either results from, or is related to, the nonconscious reduction of tensions or inhibitions. Developed as a form of self-generated pleasure in the infant and rewarded both physically and psychologically by feelings of gratification, laughter provides a highly effective, useful, and contagious means of vocal communication. It deals with a wide range of cultural problems, often more effectively than speech, in much the same manner that crying, an infantile, probably instinctive reaction to discomfort, communicates an unmistakable emotional state to others.

The reasons for laughter in complex social situations is another question and is answered differently by philosophers and psychologists. The English novelist George Meredith proposed a theory, resulting from his analysis of 18th-century French court comedies, that laughter serves as an enjoyable social corrective. The two best known modern theories of the social wellsprings of laughter are the philosopher Henri Bergson's hypothesis that laughter is a

form of rebellion against the mechanization of human behaviour and nature, and Freud's concept of laughter as repressed sexual feeling. The writer Arthur Koestler regarded laughter as a means of individual enlightenment, revelation, and subsequent freedom from confusion or misunderstanding concerning some part of the environment.

Man's vocal instrument as a device of communication represents an apex of physical and intellectual evolution. It can express the most basic instinctual demands as well as a range of highly intellectual processes, including the possible mastery of numerous complex languages, each with an enormous vocabulary. Because of the imitative capacity of the vocal mechanism (including its cortical directors), suitably talented individuals can simulate the sounds of nature in song, can communicate in simple ways with animals, and can indulge in such tricks as ventriloquism and the mimicry of other voices. Recent tape recording techniques have even extended this flexibility into new domains, allowing singers to accompany their own voices in different keys to produce effects of duets or choruses composed electronically from one person's voice.

Mass and public communication

Prerequisites for mass communication

The technology of modern mass communication results from the confluence of many types of inventions and discoveries, some of which (the printing press, for instance) actually preceded the Industrial Revolution. Technological ingenuity of the 19th and 20th centuries has developed the newer means of mass communication, particularly broadcasting, without which the present near-global diffusion of printed words, pictures, and sounds would have been impossible. The steam printing press, radio, motion pictures, television, and sound recording—as well as systems of mass production and distribution—were necessary before public communication in its present form might occur.

Technology was not, however, the only prerequisite for the development of mass communication in the West. A large public of literate citizens was necessary before giant publishing and newspaper empires might employ extant communications technology to satisfy widespread desires or needs for popular reading materials. Affluence and interest were (and are) prerequisites for the maintenance of the radio, television, cinema, and recording industries, institutions that are presently most highly developed in wealthy, industrial nations. Even in countries in which public communication is employed largely for government propaganda, certain minimal economic and educational standards must be achieved before this persuasion is accepted by the general public.

Control of mass communication

Over the years, control of the instruments of mass communication has fallen into the hands of relatively small (some claim diminishing) numbers of professional communicators who seem, as populations expand and interest widens, to reach ever increasing numbers of people. In the United States, for example, far fewer newspapers currently serve more readers than ever before, three television networks are predominant, and a handful of book publishers produce the majority of the best-sellers.

Public communicators are not entirely free to follow their own whims in serving the masses, however. As is the case of any market, consumer satisfaction (or the lack of it) limits the nature and quantity of the material produced and circulated. Mass communicators are also restricted in some measure by laws governing libel, slander, and invasion of privacy and, in most countries, by traditions of professionalism that entail obligations of those who maintain access to the public's eyes and ears. In almost every modern nation, privileges to use broadcasting frequencies are circumscribed either loosely or rigidly by government regulations. In some countries, national agencies exercise absolute control of all broadcasting, and in certain areas print and film media operate under strict government control. Written and film communications may be subject to local legal restraints in regard to censorship and have restrictions similar to those of other private businesses. Traditions of decorum and self-censorship, however, apply variably to publishers and filmmakers, depending usually upon the particular markets to which their fare is directed.

Effects of mass communication

Lively controversy centres on the effect of public communication upon audiences, not only in matters concerning public opinion on political issues but in matters of personal life-styles and tastes, consumer behaviour, the sensibilities and dispositions of children, and possible inducements to violence. Feelings regarding these matters vary greatly. Some people construe the overall effects of mass communication as generally harmless to both young and old. Many sociologists follow the theory that mass communication seems to influence attitudes and behaviour only insofar as it confirms the status quo—*i.e.*, it influences values already accepted and operating in the culture. Numerous other analysts, usually oriented to psychological or psychiatric disciplines, believe that mass communications provide potent sources of informal education and persuasion. Their conclusions are drawn largely from observations that many, or most, people in technological societies form their personal views of the social realities beyond their immediate experience from messages presented to them through public

communication.

To assume that public communication is predominantly reflective of current values, morals, and attitudes denies much common experience. Fashions, fads, and small talk are too obviously and directly influenced by material in the press, in films, and in television to support this view. The success of public communication as an instrument of commercial advertising has also been constant and noticeable. Present evidence indicates that various instruments of mass communication produce varying effects upon different segments of the audience. These effects seem too numerous and short-lived to be measured effectively with currently available instruments. Much of the enormous output on television and radio and in print is probably simply regarded as “play” and of little consequence in affecting adult dispositions, although many psychologists believe that the nature of children’s play experiences is critical to their maturation.

The role of newspapers, periodicals, and television in influencing political opinion is fairly well established in the voting behaviour of the so-called undecided voters. Numerous studies have shown that while the majority of citizens in the United States cast their votes along party lines and according to social, educational, and economic determinants, middle-of-the-road voters often hold the balance of power that determines the outcomes of elections. Politicians have become sensitive to their television images and have devised much of their campaign strategy with the television audience in mind. Advertising agencies familiar with television techniques have been brought into the political arena to plan campaigns and develop their clients’ images. The effectiveness of television campaigning cannot yet be determined reliably.

Public communication is a near-ubiquitous condition of modernity. Most reliable surveys show that the majority of the people of the world (including those of totalitarian countries) are usually satisfied with the kind of mass communication available to them. Lacking alternatives to the communication that they easily and conveniently receive, most people seem to accept what they are given without complaint. Mass communication is but one facet of life for most individuals, whose main preoccupations centre on the home and on daily employment. Public communication is an inexpensive addendum to living, usually directed to low common denominators of taste, interest, and refinement of perception. Although mass communication places enormous potential power in the hands of relatively few people, traditional requirements for popular approval and assent have prevented its use for overt subversion of culturally sanctioned institutions. Fear of such subversion is sometimes expressed by critics.

The psychology of communication

Contemporary psychologists have, since World War II, shown considerable interest in the ways in which communications occur. Behaviourists have been prone to view communication in terms of stimulus-response relationships between sources of communications and individuals or groups that receive them. Those who subscribe to Freud's analysis of group psychology and ego theory tend to regard interactions in communication as reverberations of family group dynamics experienced early in life.

By the middle 1950s, psychological interest settled largely on the persuasive aspects of various types of messages. Psychologists have attempted to discover whether a general factor of personality called "persuasibility" might be identified in people at large. It would appear, though with qualifications, that individuals are indeed variably persuasible and that, at times, factors of personality are related to this quality.

Other psychologists have studied the recipients of communication, evolving concepts of "selective perception," "selective attention," and "selective retention" in order to explain not only the ways in which communication changed attitudes but also the reasons for resistance to change. Among their interests were the dynamics of the communication of rumours, the effects of "scare messages," the degree of credulity that sources of prestige value provide, and the pressure of group consensus upon individual perceptions of communications.

Some of the suggestions that emerged from the work of certain modern psychologists may be subsumed under a theory of what is called "cognitive dissonance," which is based upon the observation that most people cannot tolerate more than a specific degree of inconsistency in the environments they perceive. An example of cognitive dissonance may involve a person who considers himself a superb bowler but who on one occasion earns an extremely low score. The dissonant or inconsistent elements include the bowler's knowledge of his skill and the fact of his poor score. This produces tension. To reduce this tension—dissonance—the bowler may change his behaviour or misinterpret or reinterpret the dissonant elements in order to lessen the difference between the facts. For example, he may blame his performance on the bowling ball, the alley, or the temperature of the room. Thus he seeks a psychological equilibrium.

This modification of an individual's perception of reality is of fundamental interest to the psychologist of communications. Because the agreement or disagreement of a communication with an individual's cognitive structure not only affects his behaviour but his perception as well, the major criterion for the psychological analysis

of communication is neither the message nor the medium but the expectation of the person receiving the message.

It must not be assumed that any of the theories of audience psychology offered to date (including those of Gestaltists, Freudians, Behaviourists, and others) lack relevance to an understanding of communication processes. None, however, seems to account fully for all of the effects of communications upon people. The many facets of communication offer substantial problems for future psychological experimentation and theorizing.

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