

'How are Messages Created?': Changes in Thinking about Communication Theory leading to a New Synthesis

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Abstract

In trying to answer the question 'How are messages created?' (Cobley 1994, p. 1) we can see that, within the discipline of communication and media studies, researchers have developed a number of ideas, models, concepts and theories to explain the phenomenon of communication itself: what it is, how it works and what are the implications of seeing things in those ways. These developments have covered objectivist, subjectivist, materialist, idealist, quantitative and qualitative frameworks. One can discern within that wealth of information certain schools of thought that have developed which have moved from thesis to antithesis and then to synthesis, as commonly attributed to Hegelian philosophy (Kaufmann 1978). For example, the process school can be seen as a well lodged thesis. It sees the transmission of information from one point to the next as the best way to describe communication (Fiske 1990). Its antithesis can be described as the cultural context school. This school insists the generation of meaning is not to be found in a linear act of communication, but is instead processed within particular cultural contexts and 'markers of communication...will be read and evaluated differently by different people, depending on the cultural contexts they bring to any communication practice, and on the specific contexts in which that practice takes place' (Schirato & Yell 2000, p. 8). These changes in thinking from school to school have led to some consideration that a synthesis of these two divergent ways of seeing communication may be proposed. Starting at the point of ontology and epistemology and then drawing predominantly on the work of Bourdieu, Csikszentmihalyi, and Rogers and Kincaid, it is suggested here that this synthesis may be found in seeing acts of communication in a similar manner to the way creativity and cultural production has been theorised in recent research, that is, acts of communication come into being as emergent properties of what may be best described as a system of communication at work.

Across the discipline of communication some fundamental questions have been presented for those wishing to research this phenomenon. For example, Paul Cobley (1996) has suggested research into communication asks the following: "How are messages created?"; "How are messages transmitted?"; "How are messages constituted?"; "How are messages received?"; "Why is this the case?"; "Is it because of factors outside the message?"; "Or is it because of factors inside the message?". (Cobley 1996, p. 1) It is the first of these questions that concerns us here – that is, how are messages created?

In pursuing not only this question but quite a number of others, the study of communication has acquired a particular history. However, according to Arthur Berger, those who 'write the scripts,

perform them, direct the performers, and provide the technical expertise necessary to create texts of all kinds' (1995, p 146):

...tend to be the forgotten men and women in the field of mass communication scholarship. Researchers devote a great deal of attention to audiences and to the media, and to effects of mass-mediated texts on audiences in particular and on society in general. But there has not been a great deal of attention paid, generally speaking, to... [those who] create texts of all kinds (Berger, 1995, p. 145-146).

If this is still really the case, the question then becomes: What frameworks do we have in the discipline that can best reveal how acts of communication come into being? In general, the intellectual frameworks communication studies has drawn on since it became an area of academic focus include philosophical, psychological, sociological, literary, linguistic, rhetorical, aesthetic, ethical, technological and cultural ones. This discipline thus 'builds on a mix of classical humanities and social science fields of enquiry' (Monash, 2010).

While Peter Putnis (1986) argued in his paper, 'Communication Studies in Australia: Paradigms and Contexts', that the discipline had been caught in a cross-current of predominantly Anglo and American influences (Maras, 2004, online), most of the introductions to the various aspects of the field (Fiske, 1990; McQuail, 1994, 2000, 2002; Griffin, 1997, 2000, 2003; Schirato & Yell, 2000; Severin & Tankard, 2001; Flew, 2002; Gillespie & Toynbee, 2006; and Balnaves et al, 2010) show that not only the British and American humanities and social science academies but also the French humanities and social science academies have contributed significantly to what has been researched and taught in most communication programs in Australia. There are, in fact, a diverse set of disciplines this one continues to draw on. Each of these areas of concern has been accompanied by a seeming multitude of theories, models, concepts, ideas, research questions and research methods that can now be identified within communication studies (Carey, 1989 2002; Fiske, 1990; Schirato & Yell, 1996; McQuail, 1994, 2010; Cobley, 1996; Mohammadi, 1997; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998; Thussu, 2000; O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2002; Griffin, 2003; Cunningham & Turner, 2006, 2010; Balnaves, et al, 2010).

These world views range from the interpretivist to the objectivist, from the idealist to the materialist and often cross the divides that exist between the sciences and the humanities (Griffin, 1997). There is a dividing line in the discipline of communication between the left and right of the political spectrum which has inevitably played a major part in structuring theory. For example, it has been suggested that within the study of the sub-field of mass communication there is a fault line that exists:

...between those theorists whose interest (and conviction) lies in the realm of culture and ideas and those who emphasise material forces and factors. This divide corresponds approximately with certain other dimensions; humanistic versus scientific; qualitative versus quantitative; and subjective versus objective...[and]...often involves competing and contradictory claims about how to pose questions, conduct research and provide explanations (McQuail, 1994, p. 3).

Further, as a discipline, communication and media studies has been:

historically caught in the tension between material and immaterial networks, biological and social paradigms, nature and culture, technical devices and speech, economics and culture, micro and macro perspectives, village and globe, actor and

system, free will and social determinisms. The history of theories of communication is a record of these tensions and of the varied attempts to articulate – or avoid articulating – the terms of what all too often have appeared as dichotomies and binary oppositions rather than levels of analysis. In diverse historical contexts and formulated in various ways, these tensions and antagonisms have constantly manifested themselves, dividing the field into different schools of thought, currents and tendencies (Mattelart & Mattelart 1998, pp. 1-2) .

Some of the earliest work on communication took place within other disciplines. For example the early work on signs by C.S. Peirce took place within philosophy. The anthropologist Edward Sapir emphasised ‘the relational aspects of communication’ (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981, p. 45) and suggested that ‘the focus of communication research should be on the development of mutual understanding that emerges over time between those who share information with one another’ (ibid). While the oldest recognised model of communication can be attributed to Aristotle ‘who specified the speaker, the speech and the audience as the constituent elements of the communication act’ (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981, p. 32), this pre-figured what we can label as, following the ideas commonly attributed to Hegel (Kaufmann, 1978), the first really influential thesis within the discipline of communication. This thesis can be identified as the one that underpins the process school of communication. It is grounded within the idea of transmission as the fundamental aspect of communication and is most often aligned with a predominantly objectivist world view. From this perspective ‘communication is to be defined as a transfer of information from sender to individual receiver’ (McQuail, 2010, p. 353). Griffin asserts that “almost all the other theories...work to correct this linear conception of communication. Equating information transmission with communication, however, is an idea that dies hard” (1997, p. 55). This school of thought has

tended to place power to control meaning at the level of the producer (for overviews see Blake & Hareldsen, 1975; Fiske, 1990), while the so-called cultural context school, which developed in reaction to it, has tended to place the power to control meaning at the level of reception and/or the context it occurs in (see Schirato & Yell, 1996; Schirato & Yell, 2000) (McIntyre, 2010, p. 1).

In summary, the process school tends to be largely objectivist, possibly absolutist and tends to privilege production. On the other hand, the cultural context school of thought, the antithesis to the transmission model, is predominantly subjectivist, primarily relativist and oriented mainly toward acts of reception. From this latter perspective, it is insisted that ‘meanings are not to be found or understood exclusively in terms of acts of communication, but are processed within a specific cultural context’ (Schirato & Yell, 2000, p. 1). Communication is, from this school of thought’s point of view, ‘the practice of producing meanings’ (ibid) and it tends to concentrate on ‘the ways in which systems of meaning are negotiated by participants in a culture’ (ibid). Further, ‘markers of communication (words and gestures, for instance) will be read and evaluated differently by different people, depending on the cultural contexts they bring to any communication practice, and on the specific contexts in which that practice takes place’ (Schirato & Yell, 2000, p. 8). In this case the sender of a message is no longer the locus of power in making meaning. Production for this school of thought can be more readily located in acts of reception. This conception breaks the uni-linearity of the process model and depends on a different conception of power, in particular the power to control meaning, seeing it as far less ‘top down’ than ‘diffuse’.

While each school of thought sees problems with the other, there are matters of merit to be found in each of these ways of looking at the world of communication. If this is the case, the question then becomes: how best to get these two seemingly disparate world views to sit together? To put this problem another way, and once again following the line of reasoning usually attributed to Hegel (Kaufmann, 1978), what would a synthesis of these prior ideas look like? To begin exploring what that synthesis might be, we should start at the level of ontology. This, according to Crotty (1994) and Grix (2004), is the basis for all of our understandings.

According to Andy Ruddock, an ontology is related to 'how we understand the nature of reality...epistemology refers to a theory of knowledge' (Ruddock, 2001, p. 27). Ways of knowing, that is epistemologies, are 'related to ontology in that the nature of the reality you set out to explore influences the sort of knowledge that you can have of it' (ibid). Similarly Jonathan Grix, citing Norman Blaikie, suggests 'ontological assumptions are concerned with what we *believe* constitutes social reality (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8)' [italics in original] (Grix 2004, p. 59). Michael Crotty (1998, pp. 1-17) takes this further by conflating both ontology and epistemology, suggesting that as well as an objectivist or subjectivist ontology, one can ascribe to a third position, what he calls a constructionist ontology. This position appears to incorporate the best of both worlds.

From this latter perspective, at the ontological level we can claim a world view that is constructionist and holistic in as much as the act of communication cannot be simply reduced to its objective constituent parts, nor can it be seen as entirely subjectivist, free-floating and relative. We should be able to allow for the possibility 'that there exists a reality independent of our representation of it' (Basdan, 2004, online) and at the same time we should also acknowledge that 'our knowledge of reality is subject to all kinds of historical and other influences' (ibid). A critical realist position, drawing on a constructionist ontology of the type described by Crotty, 'draws a clear distinction between reality and our knowledge of reality ... It sees reality and our knowledge of reality as operating in two different dimensions' (ibid). As Roy Bhaskar argues (Davies 1999, pp. 18-19) both objectivist and subjectivist perspectives have over-simplified and misconstrued the nature of the social and cultural world people actually engage with. Positivists assume it to be 'merely empirically real' only to be seen in what can be observed. Subjectivists take it to be 'transcendentally ideal' insisting that a thing such as culture or society exists 'only in the ideas that social actors hold about it' (ibid).

These perspectives give us either a conceptually impoverished and deconceptualising empiricism, or a hermeneutics drained of causal import and impervious to empirical controls (ibid). In their place Bhaskar proposes a much more subtle and complex view of society in which human agents are neither passive products of social structures nor entirely their creators but are placed in an iterative and naturally reflexive feedback relationship to them (Davies, 1999, pp. 18-19).

Human agents, all 7 billion of them, are inescapably implicated in a set of structures that both limit and enable their agency; agency, in this case, being the ability of a subject to make choice and act on that choice. Structures are those things or objects thought to determine actions and behaviours. Rather than seeing these two states as opposites, Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) also claims that 'neither structure nor action can exist independently; both are intimately related' (Haralambos & Holbern, 1995, p. 904). Giddens talks about the 'duality of structure', to suggest that 'structures

make social action possible, and at the same time that social action creates those very structures' (ibid). Giddens argued, importantly, that 'structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling' (Giddens, 1984, p 25).

Pierre Bourdieu, in also attempting to reconcile agency and structure and place them in some kind of iterative and reflexive feedback relationship with each other, uses the mechanisms and concepts of habitus, field, cultural and social capital and field of works to do this. For example, in his work on the fields of cultural production (1993) he sets out how the various aspects of communication, that is sender/production, message/text, receiver/consumption and the contexts they exist in, may be united. As Randall Johnson explains, Bourdieu's ideas take into consideration

not only works themselves [i.e. texts], seen relationally within the space of available possibilities and within the historical development of such possibilities, but also producers of works [i.e. senders] in terms of their strategies and trajectories, based on their individual and class habitus, as well as their objective position within the field [i.e. immediate context]. It also entails an analysis of the structure of the field itself, which includes the positions occupied by producers (writers, artists) [that is, senders] as well as those occupied by all the instances of consecration and legitimation which make cultural products what they are (the public, publishers, critics, galleries, academies and so forth) [that is, receivers]. Finally, it involves an analysis of the position of the field within the broader field of power [that is, social and cultural context] (Johnson in Bourdieu, 1993, p. 9).

In short, Bourdieu's theoretical orientation (1977, 1993, 1990, 1996) encompasses holistically 'the set of social conditions of the production, circulation and consumption of symbolic goods' (Johnson in Bourdieu 1993, p. 9). Given this assertion, it may thus be difficult to continue privileging either producers, texts, receivers or contexts in a theoretical understanding of communication. He argues instead that we need to look at '*all these things at the same time*' [italics in original] (ibid). Seeing communication as holistically as this correlates well (McIntyre 2008, 2008a, 2012) with the idea of creativity as systemic (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, 1997, 1999). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has proposed that

three major factors, that is, a structure of knowledge manifest in a particular symbol system (*domain*), a structured social organisation that understands that body of knowledge (*field*), and an individual agent (*person*) who makes changes to the stored information that pre-exists them, are necessary for creativity to occur. These factors operate through 'dynamic links of circular causality' (1988, p. 329) with the starting point in the process being 'purely arbitrary' (ibid) indicating the system's essential nonlinearity. Each component factor in the system is as equally important as the others, as each 'affects the others and is affected by them in turn' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 329), (McIntyre, 2009, p. 161).

From these understandings we can then define creativity as an activity where some process, product, object or idea, one that is considered by at least one social organisation to be unique and valuable, is brought into being from a set of structural antecedents through the act of a conditioned agent. If it can also be argued that communication is the bringing into being of signification we should be able to see it as systemic as well. Given that the process of meaning-making doesn't occur in a vacuum, it is always contextual, the corollary of this line of thinking is that signification, in order to come into being, must emerge from the interaction of a multiple set of

factors operating in an open and dynamic system. This proposition is close to what Everett Rogers and Lawrence Kincaid were themselves proposing.

They define communication as ‘a process in which the participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding’ (1981, p. 63). For Rogers and Kincaid, in developing what they called the convergence model of communication, where communication relies on networks for its existence, the primary component of communication is information. This is an idea shared with the transmission model, as both sets of ideas developed out of information theory. Rogers and Kincaid argue it is difficult to focus on communication without some orientation toward information ‘or at least to one of its synonyms. In fact, both (1) the concept of network, and (2) the principle of convergence, derive from information’ (1981, p 48). They declare that looking at the idea of information is a necessity, as it is a basic conception at the heart ‘of all living systems’ (ibid) and the idea of information must therefore be critical to the study of human communication. Why is this the case? In a manner similar to Shannon and Weaver, since they were working from similar propositions, Rogers and Kincaid declare ‘information is a difference in matter-energy which affects uncertainty in a situation where a choice exists among a set of alternatives’ (1981, p. 48). However, the difference between these two partnerships is that Rogers and Kincaid felt this definition, while it has become conventional and thus central to those who adhere to the process or transmission model, was incomplete. For them

it does not do full justice to the richness of the concept or to its relationship to other important concepts that provide understanding of the same phenomenon. The emphasis of others on the "reduction" of uncertainty obscured the creative aspects of information-processing (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981, p 48).

The ability to bring a communicative act into being, in other words to create a message, is the flip side of controlling noise. It is, so to speak, a positive use of information. They argue that

To create information with the letters of a word, for example, first requires that some physical substance (like ink on paper) be modified such that the desired form can be distinguished from other possible forms, and from the background or context of the medium itself (a blank page, for example). This difference-creating process requires expenditure of energy or, in other words, action (1981, p 48).

They stress that a lot of thinking on communication has not readily accepted there is a deep interconnectedness at play where, firstly, ‘the creation of information occurs at a physical level of reality’ (1981, p 52), and secondly, ‘that interpretation occurs at the psychological level of reality’ (ibid), and thirdly ‘that perception bridges the physical and psychological levels of reality’ (ibid). For Rogers and Kincaid, meaning proceeds from these prior three but takes place at a higher level of abstraction. However, unlike the transmission model, their convergence model of communication emphasises a ‘contextual approach to meaning, rather than a referential approach’ (1981, p 53). They might not declare this to be the case, but it can be argued that this conception places them ontologically within a constructionist view of the world. They state that ‘by “reality” we do not mean physical reality itself, to which individuals may have no direct access, but rather information about physical reality’ (1981, p. 63). To put this proposition another way, Rogers and Kincaid understand there is an empirical reality in existence, but the truth encountered about it perceptually is dependent on the vagaries of interpretation in the production of meaning (1981, pp. 53-55). They also understand that the most significant trait ‘of the information-sharing process is

the communication circuit, or network of circuits, by which individuals within a system are interconnected' (1981, p. 61). For them

a system is a set of interrelated parts coordinated to accomplish a set of goals (Churchman, 1968, p. 29). Human systems are connected and coordinated, not by mechanical means or by the force of matter and energy, but rather by the exchange of information (Watzlawick and others, 1967) (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981, p. 61).

At this point we should be reminded of Mattelart and Mattelart's admonition (1998, p. 3) not to set about reinventing a disciplinary wheel since we are not operating with a complete *tabula rasa* here. As the research literature into creativity also tells us, each new idea is firmly built on a set of antecedent ones. Therefore, in synthesising the ideas on communication discussed briefly above, in particular those of Csikszentmihalyi, Bourdieu and Rogers and Kincaid, into a coherent whole we can now tentatively claim there are three major factors one can identify in a system of communication. These are symbol structures which provide sources of information, an agent who arranges and rearranges this information, and a field of users which can be seen as a network of individuals but may, in truth, be closer in conception to Bourdieu's application and use of the term field. These three parts of the system, a symbol structure, an agent and a field, can be described as holons, a term developed by Arthur Koestler (1975) to describe an entity that, when you look at it from one perspective, seems to be self-contained and complete but from another point of view appears to be a dependent part within a system of some kind, be it biological, social or cultural. To elaborate, these three holons, or complex interrelated parts and wholes, include:

1. The array of symbolic structures that present possibilities of action as a generative cultural formation which itself includes languages of all types (text, audio, visual) and all preceding acts of communication.
2. The agent, as another important operative factor, or holon, within the system of communication, which can be characterised as any individual or collective entity that is active in the system in arranging and rearranging aspects of the symbol structure into communicative utterances
3. The field of users, which consists of all users of the symbol structure – that is, those who know and understand it to varying degrees. In this case, the field provides the social structure the act of communication must necessarily take place in. This field is itself constituted by agents who cohere around the array of symbolic structures and compete for positions within that field.

How does this system work? Since this is a system that produces emergent properties, that is, acts of communication, we cannot isolate one factor over the others and designate that as a starting point. In no particular order, we can say that the agent must access the symbol structure, usually through a process of immersion in it, in order to obtain symbols or information to use, remembering that the symbol structure will pre-exist the agent. The agent constructs symbols into specific communicative expressions which are influenced through interpretation by the field of users, noting again that the agent is also a constituent member of the field. The symbol structure informs the agent's choice in the construction and use of particular expressions of that symbol system. In this way the symbol structure acts as both an enabling and constraining factor. The field is the same. It is constituted through both inclusion and exclusion. Those who have no understanding of the symbol system, or do not recognise it, are excluded from it. Those utterances or acts of communication that are readily interpreted, as well as those seen as worthy, are

recognised as constituent parts of the symbol structure itself and are included in it. In this way the symbol structure exists as a dynamic entity, but that dynamism is dependent on the actions of agents using it. At the same time the field is dependent on the stability of the symbol structure for its own coherence and existence.

From this perspective we can now say that what we have called production, texts and consumption, and have often treated as isolated parts of a unilinear process, are not seen here as separate entities. It is argued that they can only be isolated from the system for purposes of analysis as they constitute integrated aspects of the system itself and are themselves constituted by it. It is this system that brings meaning into being. This is how messages are created.

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