Communication and media

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Contents

Preface ................................................................. 1
    T. Howland Sanks and John A. Coleman
1. Reading the Signs of the Times: Purpose and Method ..... 3
    T. Howland Sanks

2. A Cultural Overview ............................................ 12
    John A. Coleman

SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

3. The People: Demographics ................................. 27
    Joseph P. Fitzpatrick

4. Doughnuts and Dolphins: Political Order in the United States 35
    Timothy J. Lukes

5. The New International System .............................. 47
    Eric O. Hanson

6. The Economy ................................................... 56
    James R. Stormes

7. Poverty in the United States .............................. 68
    William O'Neill
Communication and the Media

Paul A. Soukup

The complex interchange of communications in North American society functions to connect people and ideas; to "invent" new patterns of knowing and valuing; to inform; to regulate behavior, values, and agendas; and to entertain. In particular, the media shape perceptions of what is important, and affect both political life and interpersonal exchanges.

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication forms such a pervasive structure for communal human life that it goes virtually unnoticed. Yet the manner of interchange as well as its content have connotations that very precisely define the communication partners, their relationship, and the society in which they participate. In an attempt to make this realm of communication more accessible, this essay briefly sketches some ways of conceiving communication, several of its functions, and finally some of the effects of communication on society in the United States. It is not a summary study of the effects of mass media on American culture. “Communication” here means both the manner in which human beings interact with one another and the media through which that interaction takes place, as well as the media and manner of interaction as institutions of society.

II. MODELS/PERSPECTIVES FOR COMMUNICATION

Four common models characterize much contemporary thinking and writing about communication. The mechanistic model, which considers communication in terms of the mechanical processes of message transmission, dominates much popular thinking, to the point where com-
munication is equated with the mass media which merely transmit some preexisting content. This thinking tends to quantify communication and strives to measure effects and meanings. The interactionist model defines communication as an interaction between people rather than situating it in a message channel. Communication content or meaning emerges only as a mutual product from those communicating; further, it becomes clear only through the history of the dialogue over time. While more humanistic, this view also tends to be more relativistic. The pragmatic model (or systems approach) looks at communication networks; the exchange between interlocking social systems defines communication. While broader, this horizon of investigation often downplays the human role within communication. Finally, a ritual model shifts the focus away from an examination of the process of communication in order to look at the place of communication in society. In this view communication matters more as an action: the fact that people communicate gives structure to their living. The regular, patterned moments of communication and the media through which these moments occur have a cumulative effect far greater than any particular content.

These four models suggest that communication in American culture is a more complex phenomenon than at first imagined. Any attempt to understand the role of communication must take into account the various ways of viewing possible interactions as well as the distortions that each model necessarily includes.

III. SOME FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATION

An analysis of the functions which communication performs will vary somewhat according to the perspective chosen. However, in general, communication accomplishes several major things besides simply conveying information: it connects, it “invents” (in the rhetorical sense of that term), it informs, it regulates, and it entertains.

A. Connective

Communication establishes human society by connecting individuals to their environment and to other individuals, and by moving individuals and groups toward greater organization. Moreover, it reinforces group identity: communication is the “glue” that holds society together by providing a common background, a common set of assumptions. For individuals, communication provides a condition for self-expression through establishing and fostering common languages, customs, and cul-
Communication and the Media / 149

...with merely transmit some information. The interactionist model defines communication as an act of meaning, rather than situating it as a process. Further, it becomes clear that communication matters more as a social structure to their living. The pragmatic model (or the rhetorical sense of communication) not only joins people, but ideas as well, giving shape to those ideas as they are formulated and shared. In so doing, communication helps to assimilate the diverse and competing goods of society. Throughout society many individuals and groups vie for attention: communication not only transmits these calls but also helps to determine which will be heard by assimilating them into forms in which they can be grasped by their intended audiences. Presidential rhetoric, for example, always shifts as November elections draw near and becomes more centrist. The exigencies of communication demand this if a candidate is to reach a large population. Correspondingly, the pro-life movement may have less success because of its non-centrist communication choices.

Note, too, the connecting role of the ritual experience of communication. Communication events strengthen the social fabric which defines America. Daily rituals (reading the paper, watching news or game shows), yearly ones (Superbowls, Veterans' Day parades), and quadrennial ones (elections) structure personal and national identity as much as saints days and religious holidays used to bind people together in an era of faith.

B. Inventive

Communication is "inventive": an individual's or a society's involvement in speech or communicative acts enhances and develops knowledge. In other words, communication has a didactic role, providing an instrument for discovering truth and at the same time acting as an oblique indicator of what society feels is right and wrong, true and false. A good example of this is the rhetoric operative within the educational process, a rhetoric which legitimizes certain definitions and descriptions of reality and bars others as superstition or ideology.

In addition to its teaching role, communication also creates by bringing about a cultural sense of agreement on what constitutes knowledge; it creates a sense of time by directing communal attention to the future and making that future present in words and message exchanges. For example, the news media heighten the American sense of future by their variety of forecasts, indices and predictions, affecting everything from politics to...
the economy to perceptions of the weather. The communication employed by society also gives it a sense of faithfulness to the values and goals defined by that communication. For example, Americans sense that they are a basically good people, blessed by God, largely because of their highly moral rhetorical concepts and styles.

Finally, communication invents through its transforming function. The structures and contents of value systems constantly shift and adapt to the communicative norms that carry and propagate them. Communication can elevate concepts or values, reduce them, or reinterpret them by associating them with different structural wholes. For example, the cultural response to centralized authority in America has dramatically shifted within the last forty years—a shift in part caused by an aggressive press publicly challenging the claims of authority in certain areas.

C. Informative

Without a doubt, communication and media inform. They pass on to huge numbers of people the results of their own invention, as well as the events witnessed by reporters and other sources. Some regard this function as so evident that it passes without scrutiny. That unquestioned role of communication is itself noteworthy, particularly since no medium exists in a value-free state.

Today humans receive most of their knowledge of the world in a mediated fashion. What people directly experience shrinks in comparison to what they learn through television, film, radio, newspapers, or conversations with others to the point where they trust mediated experience over their own direct experience. Who has not turned to neighbors, newspaper, or television to confirm their perception of the accident they witnessed or the game they attended? The informative function of communication bestows an added degree of legitimacy upon the content it reports.

This state of affairs has some built-in dangers. First, it masks its own role by appearing transparent or natural. People forget that individuals and institutions manufacture the news that they see, hear, or read. Newspapers and television programs are products, the result of an assembly line-like process of composition. Second, it lends added credibility to mediated sources, sometimes giving the strongest voices the greatest believability. In other words, the accounts most often repeated become those most easily trusted. U.S. citizens have experienced this in controlled news situations like the Persian Gulf war and the El Salvador civil war. Third, it lulls people into a false security: they forget that more and more media sources have come under the control of fewer and fewer corpora-
Communication and the Media / 151

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tions. Diversity of information has disappeared; corporate decisions rather than public interest govern news values.

D. Regulative

Communication regulates human behavior by establishing and enforcing a code which prescribes the linguistic and behavioral options available to the users of that code. The standardized norms of communication demand that things be done or spoken in particular ways. People who do not obey those codes and rules are condemned to be ineffective or—at best—impolite communicators.

Communication acts as a regulator for societal life by inculcating, affirming and maintaining publicly shared values. It is an extraordinarily strong medium for the embodiment of common values: television, for example, highlights appropriate ways to behave, standards of humor, acceptable levels of interpersonal interaction and so on, simply by providing models to millions of homes simultaneously. But within a large and pluralistic society, competing value structures will be carried by different communications systems or will compete within one nondifferentiating system. Both alternatives coexist in contemporary America.

The gate-keeping function plays a more obvious regulative role. Originally named in reference to individuals who decided which news stories got into the paper, the gatekeeper function can also apply to the whole communication system insofar as it determines who gets information and what information will be passed on to others. The information can be news, values, options for action, opinions, and so forth. Every communication system employs gatekeepers to filter information flow, to sort important from unimportant data, and to smooth and manage all incoming and outgoing material.

Finally, the various media regulate society and individual behavior by an agenda-setting function: they focus attention on particular issues, concerns, events, and values. In so doing, the means of communication set up "zones of legitimacy" for discussion. This attribution of salience to specific topics is one of the most powerful ways in which the institution of communication influences society. In so giving shape to a culture and its concerns through these varied paths of regulation the means of communication in a very real sense tell people, not what to think, but how to think and about what to think. A good example of this process at work is the rapidity with which "crisis" topics, such as famine in Africa or homelessness in the United States, fade from public concern while others, such as war and peace in the Middle East or economic upheaval around the world, linger on the horizon of public consciousness.
At one time the church held a monopoly on this regulatory function of communication, especially through gatekeeping and agenda-setting. As other systems of communication (particularly print and broadcast media) have developed, the church more and more finds itself as one voice among many. This, too, shapes contemporary America and its religious situation.

E. Entertaining

Finally, communication entertains. People turn increasingly to media products—film, television, light reading, video, computer games, music, and so on—to pass time and to relax.

While the entertainment function of communication may not differ from an earlier time when conversation and storytelling dominated recreation, the specific role of media does change some things. For example, mass media leisure activities lead to a strong common culture in which everyone shares the same cultural icons and consequently result in a loss of diversity as evening television replaces so much else. Such entertainment keeps people at home and away from other things: streets empty and social centers, town halls, and churches have difficulty attracting people to once-successful programs. The preponderance of common entertainment correlates with a shift in marketing strategies that link entertainment and consumption. As every parent knows, no child wants to be the last one to have the latest toy that appears on Saturday morning cartoons. Children and adults learn to prefer individual entertainments over group activities—they watch television alone.

IV. SOME EFFECTS ON U.S. SOCIETY

Through its connecting, inventing, informing, regulating, and entertaining functions, communication embodied in various mass media profoundly affects American society. A partial listing of some of these effects indicates the influence of communication; many other things could be added, deduced from the various functions or models sketched above. However, only a few of the more important implications are suggested here.

A. Preservation vs. Change

First, communication tends to be a preservative social factor—it supports existing institutions, perhaps by default, as it begins uncritically with the status quo and passes on the assumptions and consensus of society.
This supporting effect of communication makes changing a society especially difficult when the forces for change are constrained to use the very media that work to maintain society in their attempts to influence that society.

Communication also presents a set of values, beliefs and assumptions as common to society—whether or not they are, in actuality, common. Thus, on the one hand, persuasion by appearance can become a powerful force for change—the change that could not be brought about without the cooperation of the media gatekeepers. On the other hand, the pattern of common culture presented by the structure and media of communication fosters a high mobility in American society. Not only is it technologically easier to travel, it is also less psychologically difficult, since communication makes it possible to leave support groups behind and to encounter the familiar wherever a traveller stops.

Two more serious effects of the way Americans communicate have to do with the rhetorical patterns present in American culture. The tendency to substitute talk for action, especially in the realm of politics, allows many problems to be “solved” rhetorically but not really, while buying time for political actors. For example, after much civil rights legislation, American society has changed, but many citizens still live without the benefits of that change. Society, though, has resolved the problem through the political words, even though action has not always followed.

In a similar way, communication creates purely symbolic worlds where people are simply left out: Americans may confront poverty—but not the poor. They may battle injustice—but never see its victims. Moral problems are abstracted and reduced to questions of technology or allocation of funds, or—even worse—sent to committee for more talk. Americans can insulate themselves because their rhetorical tradition allows and even encourages them to redefine the world in more optimistic terms.

B. Understanding News

Another set of effects follows from the news presentations of mass media—especially television news—and their patterns of communication. First, the American communication process simplifies things. Media train people to look for simple descriptions and solutions to complex issues, especially through their compact message form. Their messages have high levels of redundancy and linearity, setting up clear cases of cause and effect; they so highly define issues and events that nothing is left to the imagination, giving the appearance of completeness in a two-minute spot on the evening news. People accustomed to this kind of message no longer want to face complexity, preferring labels and summaries.
The media also heighten people’s senses of immediacy. The excessive present-tense built into TV and radio news (live coverage, fast-breaking stories, and so on) discourages truly in-depth reporting and absolutely outlaws patience and a sense of lived history. Time becomes something to be filled up lest a moment go by without its new content. This immediacy also facilitates a rapid shift of attention—Americans seem to stumble from crisis to crisis.

The messages of communication have high redundancy, repeating main content areas frequently—or, as in the case of commercials and instant replays, repeating the identical content over and over. This kind of redundancy shifts patterns of thought and leads to a kind of “loose listening.” People know that they can miss something and catch it again later.

Even Americans’ emotional lives and affective orientations are touched by the pattern of communication prevalent in their society. The high-intensity features of television, especially television news and dramas, maximize emotion on short notice. In addition, television feigns intimacy with its viewers, given its living room or bedroom role. Many are the cases reported of people who, on meeting a star, expect a positive personal emotional rapport with the individual because of the welcome they have given that star into their home week after week.

The types of communication in America today also influence perception according to the melodramatic or storytelling patterns sanctioned by that communication. Millions of people rearranged their lives in order to discover the Twin Peaks killer; the continuing horror of murders and political violence in El Salvador barely attracts attention. This perceptual structuring also reflects the tendency of communication media to create a synthetic “reality”: events are not actual unless they are reported or pictured. So, politicians and others in need of a forum will stage media events—so that they will become part of the collective American communication reality.

Finally, communication encourages the phenomenon of talk about talk. The various media lend themselves salience by a self-focus, giving themselves importance by taking the audience “behind the scenes” for exclusive interviews. This trend gets further transferred to all realms: politicians talk of their election strategies rather than the issues before the people; athletes talk about how the game is played rather than just going out and giving it their all; counselors, clergy, and consultants line up on talk shows to discuss problems rather than help solve them.

The simplicity, immediacy, and melodramatic imperatives of communication as practiced in America have enormous consequences for society. They tend to militate against a sense of historical continuity and favor a single outlook or a single power center. Moreover, as perception
mediacy. The excessive coverage, fast-breaking reporting and absolutely everything becomes something to be sought. This immediacy becomes something to be sought, and absolutely anything repeats itself over and over. This kind of immediacy is a kind of "loose listening" - to catch it again later.

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This collection looks “through the screen” to see television as popular culture.

