# DEFINING THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATION

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Defining a field is a professional and philosophical necessity for those who work in it, if for no other reason than to be able to explain it to others. The task requires a conceptual basis, an historical rationale, and a form of academic organization to give it practical substance.

The conceptual basis hinges on the kind of interaction we conceive communication to be. Clearly, it is interaction through symbols and messages. The nature and role of messages and systems of messages in life and society is, therefore, the distinguishing conceptual basis for communication as a field of study. This concern with the nature and role of messages is on the peripheries of many disciplines but at the center of none except communications. (I prefer to use communication, singular, for the process and communications, plural, for the field of study, or discipline, as in economics.)

What makes communications a discipline is that it has something to say about every human and social situation. As do history, economics, physics or any of the established disciplines, communications has a unique contribution to make to the understanding of any human relationship or situation.

The historical rationale for the definition, and the discipline based on it, stems from the fact that communication is the process that distinguishes *Homo Sapiens* from other species. Most animals relate, many interact, some even learn to recognize signs, but none lives in a world defined by its own symbolic constructions. Only human beings believe in the bible, play music or chess, and live and die and, alas, kill millions, because of large abstractions that loom so important to so many.

The best general term for that symbolic construction process is story telling. All our arts, sciences, religions, and statecraft, consist mostly of stories we tell and internalize. That process weaves the seamless web of human cultures defining the world and guiding its social relationships.

In that general sense, there are three types of stories, and the process of story-telling has undergone two major transformations. The three types of stories are stories about how things work (drama and fiction which make the all important but invisible relationships in life visible and understandable); stories about what things are (facts, expositions, descriptions,); and stories about what to do about them (stories of action, choice, and value such as sermons, instructions, and commercials).

For the longest time in human history, these stories were told face to face, memorized as rituals and mythologies, and incorporated in religions. The first transformation was the industrial. The first machine was the printing press which made the mass production of symbols, signs, and stories possible. It broke the ritual, and with it the magic power of the oral interpreter, the priest or others ministering by the spoken word. It ushered in the era of modern mass publics: loose aggregations of people who never meet and yet share some consciousness in common. The process by which they come to share and to become members of the far-flung aggregations called publics is aptly termed publication. Print was the first creator of mass publics. Most of our assumptions about secular government, education, and cultural life stem from the print era.

The second transformation is the electronic. We have entered the telecommunications era, the flagship of which is (and will long remain) broadcast television. That is different from other media such as print, film, or even video by cable. Television, as was pre-industrial religion, is a ritual. Most viewers watch television relatively non-selectively--by the clock and not by the program. They watch whatever is on at a particular time, and do not pick and choose and tune in and out selectively as they do with print, film in movie theaters, and cable. The essense of a centralized and officially licensed ritual like television is that it exposes far-flung and otherwise heterogeneous communities to a common system of story-telling. This tends to blur the traditional distinctions of sex, age, neighborhood, class and other interests, blend them into a more coherent ideology, and bend them to the institutional interests of television as the chief cultural arms of industrial societies.

Our research has called this process "mainstreaming" and has begun to establish its principal characteristics. These include the blurring of social and cultural distinctions and the long-term cultivation of

a more homogenized and stable ideological commonalities in otherwise heterogeneous communities across the nation and the world. That process makes obsolete many of our print-based assumptions about government, education, and the cultural process. It raises fundamental questions not only about basic concepts of democratic self-government but also about the acculturation, socialization and even survival of human communities. These questions, inherent in the rise of new story-telling systems and technologies, provide the historical challenge which the new discipline must address. The challenge of the media and their culture extends of course into every realm of interpersonal, social, and organizational activity.

The academic organization we have developed to address these issues consists of three parts. The first is what we call codes and modes meaning the area of study that focuses on how we structure and process messages in different media and modes and how we analyze them. This area also includes the study of general theories and models of information and communication, and the analysis of communication content, symbols, message systems and their social and communicational contexts.

The second area is what we call communication behavior. This label designates areas of research on communication processes and effects: how individuals and groups share meanings through messages; how cultural and social structures are regulated through communication; how attitudes and opinions are formed, how social contexts and characteristics of sources and receivers influence the meanings derived from messages; and what conception and behaviors different kinds of messages tend to cultivate.

The third area is what we call communication systems and institutions. This denotes the study of the history of communications; of public policy and technology related to communications and culture; of the structure, organization, regulation, management, and social functions of communication institutions; and of general theories of social communication systems.

Finally, permit me to announce two major new projects that I believe will help define and refine our field. The first is the Summer 1983 issue of the *Journal of Communication*, entitled "Ferment in the Field." This special and large issue includes contributions by forty-two distinguished authors from ten countries reflecting on the critical questions and research perspectives in the field.

The second major development is the work that has just begun toward publishing an *International Encyclopedia of Communications*. This is a joint project by The Annenberg School of Communications and Oxford University Press, Inc. It will be edited by Erik Barnouw, with Wilbur Schramm as consulting editor, and a distinguished international advisory board and group of authors. It will be a four-volume illustrated encyclopedia, to be published in 1989, and we hope it will have a lasting influence on the thinking of scholars in the field.

Among the participants in the 11th Annual Seminar was Kenneth E. Andersen, shown here enjoying the luncheon with some of the other attendees.