Communication: Society is the message

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COMMUNICATION is interaction through messages. Messages are formally coded, symbolic, or representational patterns of some shared significance in a culture. Culture itself may be broadly conceived as a system in which messages cultivate and regulate relationships. In one form or another, such processes occur in all forms of life, and in all social systems. But it is in human culture, and in the conduct of man's life and society, that communication plays its most complex and distinctive part.

EVOLUTION THROUGH COMMUNICATION

The simplest organic forms take in energy from their immediate surrounding. They need little information except that contained in a fixed hereditary code. When the source of life-giving energy dries up, they perish. More complex organisms use specialized senses to receive and brains to store information. They can reach out, search a wider area, pick up signals from a distance, accumulate impressions over time, relate to each other, assume different roles, and engage in behavior based on some sharing of learned significance. But of all forms of life we know, only man acts primarily through the manipulation of complex symbol systems. Symbolic context gives an act its human significance. Codes form a distinctive part of human consciousness. Messages and images rather than mainly the threats and gratifications

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of the moment animate human thought and imagination. The sharing of codes makes it possible to encompass, perpetuate, and utilize forms of significance beyond the scope of first-hand experience.

Even the most primitive peoples known have languages; create shapes, forms, and images for symbolic and representational uses; perform elaborate rituals; observe intricate kinship systems; and conduct the affairs of the tribe or society through communication. Recorded and widely transported systems of messages enable modern man to bridge vast reaches of space and time, and to cultivate values of collective survival—or to plunge into spasms of distinctively human mass destruction.

Communication is the chief distinguishing mark and evolutionary force of our species. Man's first million years ended an era of perhaps 200 times that long during which a mild and even climate covered the relatively small and flat stretches of land exposed above the surface of the oceans. Arboreal existence in lush forests freed the forearms of some mammals from having to carry the burden of the body. Exigencies of life shaped these limbs into strong, sure, delicate instruments. Eons of human evolution are compressed in the word "comprehend" : it stems from the expression "grasp with the forehand." Exceptionally deft manipulation required an exceptionally large and complex control system—the brain. The ability to grasp with the hand and with the mind literally developed "hand-in-hand."

The past million years robbed hominoids of their "paradise." Invasions of glaciers, great floods, and geologic convulsions scattered the roving bands into all parts of the globe. The featherless and furless but warm-blooded creatures developed their resources of collaboration and community through communication.

Only the hominoid brain could regulate the body, respond to the immediate environment, and still retain the reserve capacity and mechanical calm necessary to hold an image long enough to reflect on it, store it, and retrieve it in the form of symbols. This "image capacity" was the prerequisite for human imagination—and for its extension through messages. *Homo sapiens* emerged from the ice age accomplished artists, scientists, and organizers.

They had to be. Art, science, and social organization were keys to

human survival. They were based on symboling ability. Art was the shaping of sounds, forms, and images into messages that made the truths of the tribe compelling. Science was the attempt to make beliefs truer by contemplating and assessing alternative propositions. Organization was the composition of message systems into coherent structures of magic, ritual, myth, education, law, and government.

Human communication is a unique product and extension of human imagination in forms that can be learned and shared. In the broadest "humanizing" sense, communication is the production, perception, and grasp of messages bearing man's notions of what is, what is important, and what is right.

The common elements of the process weave the fabric of popular culture. Popular culture provides the context, the raw materials, and much of the substance from which to record, represent, and re-create aspects of the human condition. It is the evolutionary climate of our species.

SELF-GOVERNMENT

Experiments with self-government were predicated on an historically new conception of popular culture. This new conception assumed that men have such consciousness of existence as they themselves provide for in communications; that reason confronts realities on terms cultures make available; that societies can be self-directing only to the extent, and in ways, their public communications permit them. It was thought that popular self-government is publics, acting as citizens, collectively creating policy alternatives rather than only responding to them.

Much has happened since these assumptions found expression in revolutionary documents of civilized nations. That was the time when public communications were hand-crafted by individuals speaking for diverse publics. Committees of Correspondence and the hand-press were influential instruments of the French and American revolutions. Since that time, however, communications became commodities manufactured for sale by powerful agencies of industrial societies. Their perspectives generally reflect the existing structure of social relations

and particular types of institutional and corporate organization and control. Mass media content may be protected from the laws of government but subjected to the laws of property and of markets.

The ways men reflect on things and relate to each other are thus rooted in their ability to compose images, produce messages, and use complex symbol systems. A change in that process transforms the nature of human affairs. We are in the midst of such a transformation. It stems from the mass production of symbols and messages—an industrial revolution in information and popular culture.

Mass communication is the technologically and institutionally based mass production and distribution of the most broadly shared continuous flow of public messages in advanced industrial societies. Today the words of Andrew Fletcher, uttered in 1704, reverberate in the halls of both the Academy and government: "I believe if a man were permitted to write all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of the nation." For ours is a revolution in the making of all the ballads.

The "ballads" of an age are vivid, dramatic accounts and images that compel attention for their own sake and thus provide common assumptions about man, life, and the world. They are the means through which society communicates to its members.

The media of mass communication—printing and the transporting of sound and image by wire, film, radio, and television—are new ways of selecting, recording, viewing, and sharing man's notions of what is, what is important, what is right, and what is related to what else. Products of technology, corporate organization, mass production, and mass markets, the mass media are the cultural arms of the industrial order from which they spring; they compose a new popular culture after its image.

Mass communication is the mass-production of messages, and their rapid distribution to large and heterogeneous publics. Mass media are technologies employed by industrial organizations for the production and transmission of message systems in quantities obtainable only by mass-production or distribution methods. They bring into existence, and cultivate, a new form of common consciousness—modern mass publics.

The key to the historic significance of mass communication does not

rest in the numbers of people involved. Large groups of people were reached by other forms of public communication long before the advent of modern mass media. The new means of communication, however, extended the concept of "masses" across space and condensed it in time. The modern concept of masses is groups so large and dispersed that *only* mass-production and mass-distribution methods can reach them with the same message in a relatively short time. The key to the historic significance of mass media is their ability to mass-produce messages that create mass publics—heterogeneous social aggregates that never meet face-to-face, and have little in common except the messages they share.

Such "public-making" is the chief instrument of modern social control. When rebels take over the radio station, when election candidates demand "equal time," when advertisers buy space or time in which to deliver their message, what is bought (or fought for) is not time or space but the chief "products" of modern media: access to the publics they have created.

THE MAKING OF PUBLICS

"Public-making" in a "mass culture" is, again, not only a question of numbers. Private knowledge whispered to thousands is still private knowledge. Knowledge transmitted with full understanding that it is being shared with thousands—or millions—is public knowledge; it can create a basis for collective thought and action among anonymous and distant people. The process by which private knowledge is transformed into public knowledge is, of course, literally the process of *publicity* and *publication.*

Publication as a general social process (including all forms of mass communications) is the creation of shared ways of selecting and viewing events and aspects of life. Mass production and distribution of message systems transforms selected private perspectives into broad public perspectives, and brings mass publics into existence. These publics are maintained through continued publication. They are supplied with selections of information and entertainment, fact and fiction, news and fantasy or "escape" material which are considered important or

interesting or entertaining and profitable (or all of these) in terms of the perspectives to be cultivated.

Publication is thus the basis of community consciousness among diverse groups of people too numerous or too dispersed to interact face-to-face or in any other personally mediated fashion. That is why "the press" has a special place in the constitutions and laws of all modern states. The truly revolutionary significance of modern mass communication is its "public-making" ability. That is the ability to form historically new bases for collective thought and action quickly, continuously, and pervasively across previous boundaries of time, space, status, and class.

Such a seminal process of modern society, whose instruments are big, few, and costly, is always a public responsibility. All societies develop specialized agencies for making authoritative decisions in the field of public communications. They confer the right to operate and control large presses, motion picture and television studios, postal, telegraph, teletyping, and other cable and wireless communications, to the state, to public corporations, to political or civic organizations, or to the private holders of licenses and owners of patents, franchises, or facilities. In any case, public communication by mass media is never "free" in the sense that private personal communication is "free." The nature and purpose of selectivity and controls vary in time and by society. It is safe to say, however, that selectivity and control, inherent in any communication, dominate the mass communication process and challenge conventional theories of self-government.

The increasing tempo of industrial development in communications, beginning with rapid printing and gaining momentum with film, radio, and television, is a chief characteristic of our age. The media created new networks of influence, new audiences, publics, markets, and industrial empires. They also gave us new means and forms through which to observe each other and the world, and new points of view from which to survey the inner and outer environment.

Bigness, fewness, and costliness in cultural (as in other) industry brought centralization of control, a standardization of product, streamlined efficiency of techniques, and increasing penetration into many spheres of life. Large and intricate systems of all kinds demanded new ways of transmitting and handling the mass of information needed for

decision-making. The study of communication processes and effects became a necessary part of policy-making in business, industry, and government. Investigation of the broader implications was initiated, and study of cultural consequences has begun.

The term "propaganda" took on new and ominous meanings. We found that centralized means of communications could be used to blot out diversity from the synthetic images of life presented. On further reflection and study, propaganda was found to draw most of its strength from the everyday context of life and culture rather than from single campaigns or messages.

It was also observed that a change in man's relationship to the common culture marks the transition from one epoch to another in the way members of our species are "humanized." The rate of this change has increased (and the life-span lengthened) to such an extent that different generations living side-by-side may now be "humanized" in different ways and live in essentially different (but overlapping) cultural epochs.

The shared communicative context of messages and images through which a culture reveals the varieties, limitations, and potentials of the human condition is no longer woven out of any homespun yarn of private everyday experience. Even the meaning of "experience" has changed. Much of our behavior is in response to things we do not directly "experience." What happens in Paris, Moscow, Tokyo, Havana, Washington, Berlin, New Delhi, or London; what happens in art, science, technology, medicine, education, public administration —all these and many other constantly changing relationships affect us quickly and profoundly. Faraway story-tellers mass-produce new tales every hour and tell them to millions of children, fathers, and grandfathers at the same time. Never have so many people in so many places shared so much of a common system of messages and images, and the assumptions about life, society, and the world imbedded in them, while having so little to do with their making. The fabric of popular culture that relates elements of existence to each other and structures the common consciousness of what is, what is important, and what is right, is now largely a manufactured product.

Mass-production and distribution of communications to scattered, heterogeneous national and world communities means potential

enrichment of cultural horizons and increased life-chances incredible by all previous standards. But in an age of mass-produced abundance and mounting "surpluses," hunger and ignorance and want are no longer "natural" conditions of man's existence. And, just as the pollution of the environment, so the mass communication of superstition, bigotry, selfishness, and misanthropy becomes a rationally planned manufacturing process.

With the ability of industrial societies to produce the material requirements of subsistence and welfare, the strains and stresses of a social system come to be transferred to the mass-cultural sphere. The struggles for power and privilege, for participation in the conduct of human affairs, for more equitable distribution of resources, for all other forms of social justice, and, indeed, for survival in a nuclear age, are increasingly shifting from older arenas and methods of struggle to the newer spheres of attention, control, and contest in public communications.

Man's first million years is largely the story of survival and change through communication. The process of communication transformed hominoids into *Homo sapiens.* The industrial revolution in communications changed the traditional ways in which members of our species became "human." Today our command of communications gives us an even larger measure of control over the shaping of our society and destiny. We witness our "history" before we write it. What the current chapter will be, and whether there will be another, depends largely on how quickly we can adjust our public communications systems to the new requirements of self-government and survival in an industrial age.