A Theory of Communication and Its Implications for Teaching

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Is there a "communication approach" to human problems? If the answer is yes, what is it? What are reasons for taking such an approach? What are reasons for the development of it? What can such an approach contribute to understanding and judgment? And what implications can be derived for teaching and for the curriculum?

These are the questions I would like to reflect upon with you.

Let me define communication as social interaction performed through messages. Messages may be defined as formally coded or symbolic or representational events which are of some shared significance in a culture, and which are produced for the purpose of evoking significance.

My distinction between the "communication approach" and other approaches to human behavior rests, therefore, on the extent to which (1) messages are germane to the process studied, and (2) concern with the production, nature, and uses of messages is central to the approach employed. If there is a "communication approach" or theory or discipline, it can be distinguished from others in that *it makes the nature and role of messages in life and society its central organizing concern.*

There are many reasons for studying the nature and role of messages in life and society. Some are traditional. Certain familiar reasons include the acquisition or improvement of communication skills, appreciations, tactics, and the knowledge itself which messages and message systems signify and convey. The same reasons underlie our studies of language, composition, rhetoric, literature, art, and various other modes of verbal and non-verbal expression.

Another and less familiar reason exists for studying the nature and role of messages in life and society. Although applicable to all ages, this new reason is the outgrowth of the historical and cultural circumstances of the twentieth century. As the industrial revolution has transformed man's relation to society, the communication revolution — an extension of the industrial revolution to the mass-production of messages — has transformed man's relation to culture. This transformation has brought about the need to re-examine basic assumptions about the nature and role of messages in life and society, to inquire into the humanizing potentials of communications and of communication systems. That need is, in my view, the basic reason and historical rationale for the emergence of a

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"communication approach" to human problems.

This approach is primarily analytical and critical. It does not necessarily take the objectives of communicators or existing institutional goals as its point of departure or standard of value. Rather, it attempts to raise questions about all these components as parts of total communication situations to be assessed in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of the humanizing potentials of messages in communication, and of communications in culture. A by-product of this effort might be the improvement of skills, appreciations, and tactics. But the end result should be an improvement of standards.

It is in this way that I would like to approach a theory of communication and its implications for teaching. First, we shall consider, in a very brief outline, a view of communication as a humanizing process. Then I will sketch the development of a theory and model of communication not inconsistent with the demands placed upon theory in our view of the humanizing functions of communication. Our model will help illustrate some operational elements and relationships in communication on the process level; it will help answer the question: What happens when we interact through messages?

Next we shall ask: What *should* happen when we interact through messages? What are the desirable qualities of our operational elements and relationships in the light of our view of communication as a humanizing process? What communication and teaching functions serve these values?

After discussing communication and its implications for teaching on the value level, we shall conclude with some suggestions on the institutional level. The question there is: What happens when industrial institutions mass-produce message systems making up much of the popular culture in which all educational enterprises operate? What are some roles and responsibilities of formal education in the new cultural situation?

COMMUNICATION, A HUMANIZING PROCESS

How did *Homo sapiens* become human?

A hundred million years of evolution is compressed in the word "comprehend." It stems from the expression "to grasp with the forehand." The ability to grasp with the hand and with the mind literally developed hand-in-hand.

Life in damp tropical forests freed the forearms of a certain group of primates from the burden of carrying the body, and made them into hands — strong, sure, and delicate instruments. Exceptionally deft manipulation required an exceptionally large and complex control system — the human brain. The needs of hand-brain coordination made it possible to develop the brain capacity necessary for holding an image long enough to reflect on it, store it,

and retrieve it. This capacity is the prerequisite for the production and use of messages, and thus for human communication.

The invasion of glaciers robbed hominoids of their arboreal paradise and forced them to taste the fruits of a new type of knowledge. Huddled in cold valleys, flooded even during the warm spells, hard-pressed to develop resources of collaboration, community, and communication, *Homo sapiens* transformed himself into what we would recognize as human. He emerged from the Ice Ages a pretty accomplished artist, scientist, and organizer.

Communication played, and plays, a unique part in the human transformation. The original "wisdom" of *Homo* the *"sapiens"* stems from his symboling ability which arose, along with his tool-making talents, from marvelous hand-brain coordination and development put to communal uses. This symboling ability is the capacity to produce messages; to record, represent, and re-create aspects of the human condition; to encode, share, and decode significance; and thus, to extend the scope of consciousness beyond the reach of the senses, and to create a vision of human potentialities and requirements beyond that of any living species.

Communication infuses the other humanizing processes of collaboration and community with our most uniquely human characteristics. It does that by performing certain specialized functions in society and culture. I call these the humanizing functions of communication.

HUMANIZING FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNICATIONS

The shaping of sounds, forms, images, and stories into language, magic, legend and ritual arose from the needs of survival through living and working together. One function of these communication activities was to make work easier, life meaningful, ways of looking at life and the world convincing to those born into a culture. Let me call this the *art* function of communication as a social enterprise. Man the communicator as artist informed and inspired, frightened and entertained as he helped all to bear the hardships, share the joys, avoid the dangers, and celebrate the accomplishments of communal life. He made the truths of the tribe — or of the culture — believable and compelling.

From the taming of fire to the sowing of seeds man learned not only the arts of making truths believable, but also the importance of making beliefs truer. Man reached out, got burned, and fled in panic. But not always. For he could also reflect, and so he could contemplate an abstract proposition: Which end of a burning stick could be seized with impunity? Let me call this the *science* function of communication as a social enterprise. Man the communicator, as scientist, undertakes to assess the

validity of propositions. His function is, therefore, to make beliefs truer.

The art of moving men and the science of moving mountains confer the power to move men to move mountains. The distribution and use of this power is the third social function in communication. It is the *organizing* or administrative, or governmental function. Man the communicator as organizer is responsible for the structure of conscious reflective choices. He deals with the production, availability, and selection of messages. He decides the balance of representations available; he stacks the decks of any message system; he controls the purpose, nature and extent of freedoms built into those systems. As the humanizing role of the communicator as scientist is to make beliefs truer, and as artist to make truths more believable, his responsibility as administrator is to organize the energy and power of message systems to promote liberating ends and to make knowledge freer.

This is my view of communication as a humanizing process. I submit that theories and models of communication become useful in a general way if they have some relevance to problems of conceptual organization, judgment, and action in the humanizing process.

A COMMUNICATION MODEL: THE PROCESS LEVEL

If communication is interaction through messages, we must be able to *produce* messages, and we must be able to *perceive* messages. In other words, we must be able to perceive events in a special way, and

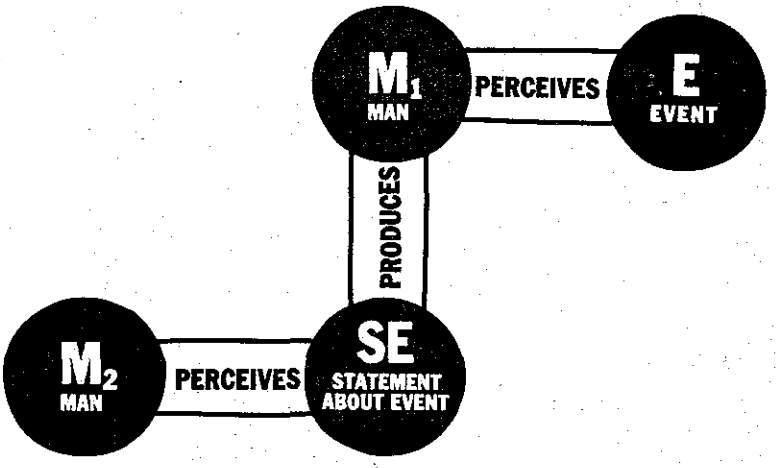


FIGURE 1

produce events in equally unique ways reflecting that special type of perception.

If we draw circles for elements and bars for interactions between the elements, a diagram can be made of a communication act.

Figure 1 is the skeleton of a basic communication act. A man perceives an event (horizontal dimension) and produces a statement about it (vertical dimension); another man perceives the statement (horizontal dimension).

Let us now look more deeply into this process, first along the perceptual (horizontal) dimension. Events (including statements) must be *available* to be perceived; you can't play the game without cards. (But the kind of cards available will, of course, determine the kind of game played.)

Secondly, the event (or statement) must be *selected* for perception. We cannot attend to all things; attention is selective. Choices depend upon availability of items. But choices also depend upon a third element of the perceptual field: context.

Context describes the method in which parts of a whole are woven together in time and space. It is the way the deck is shuffled. It affects chances of selecting any one event in a series or field of events. In addition, the context of presentation (structure of the outside field) and the context of interpretation (structure of the inside field) affect the meaning we attribute to perceptions.

Availability, context, and selection lead us from the world outside to the world in-

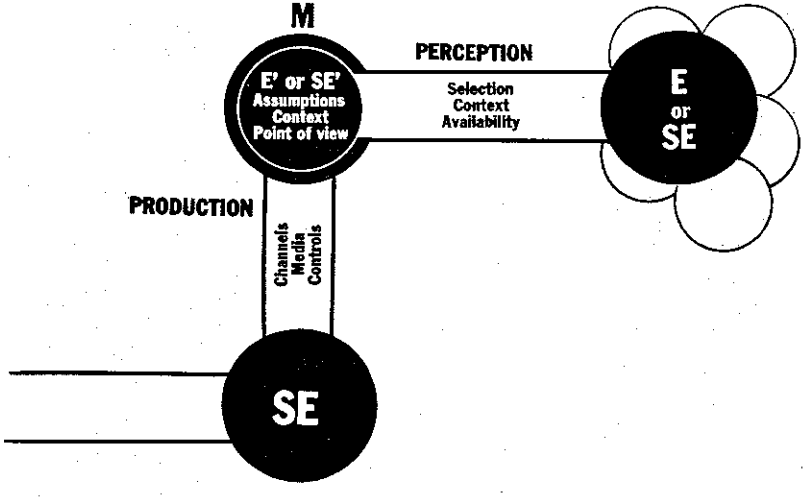


FIGURE 2

side. Let us draw a smaller circle inside "man" (M) standing for the event (or statement) "as perceived" (E' or SE'). If we also write in some of the terms of perception, the horizontal dimension of our model takes on certain changes.

As Figure 2 shows, I am suggesting that we perceive in terms of prior *assumptions*, that we fit our perceptions into a *context* of our own, and that we can only perceive (or conceive of) something from where we are

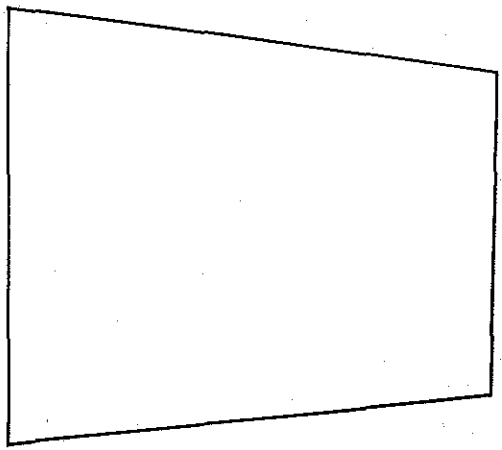


Figure 3

— from a *point of view*. Let me illustrate.

If I ask you the shape of Figure 3, chances are you will say it is a trapezoid. If I ask you the shape of a window, chances are you will say it is rectangular, even if you see it from a side view. Yet, if you see the window from a side view, its shape might look something like Figure 4. And the shape of Figure 4 is the same as the shape of Figure 3.

Why does that happen? We live in a world of rectangular shapes (some would say squares); but trapezoids are rare. So when we see a trapezoid in a familiar *context*, we *assume* that "really" it is a rectangular object seen from a *point of view* which makes rectangles appear trapezoidal.

We learn to perceive things in this way. We learn this unconsciously; but we learn

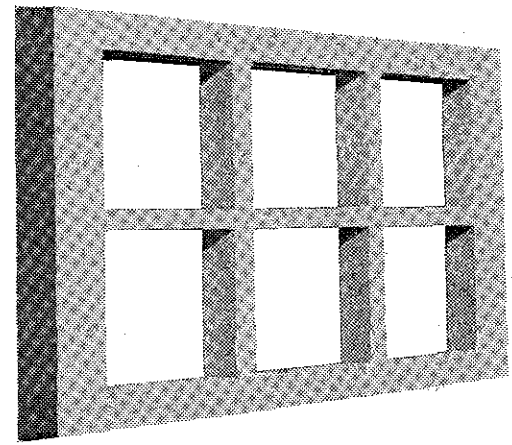


Figure 4

this way of perceiving so well that sometimes we *see* a rectangle in perspective, even when looking at a shape we *know* is really trapezoidal. The assumptions, contexts, and points of view which have formed the terms of our perceptions make it difficult to see some things as they "really" are. Figure 5 shows that our "window" is not, in fact, rectangular. But it is easier

to assume that the yardsticks are cheating, or even that the hands holding the "window" in Figure 6 are of different size, than to see a trapezoidal window. Every perception, therefore, is a judgment based on past experience and present expectation.

The significance of these statements for communication is two-fold. First, the messages we produce reflect the terms upon which we perceive. (The history of perspective drawing, for example, shows a growing awareness of these terms.) Secondly,

Figure 5

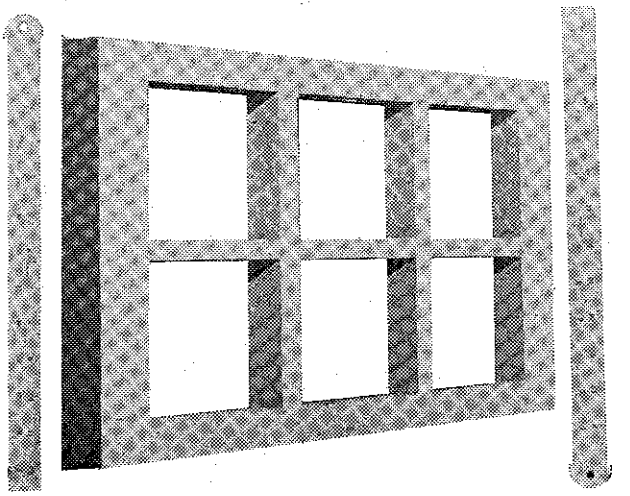
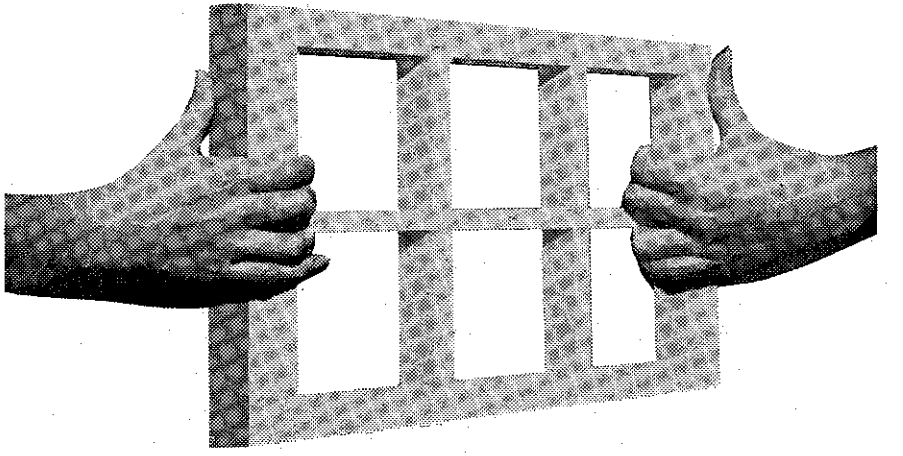


Figure 6



the way we perceive messages will be determined both by the terms of perception *built into* messages, and the assumptions, contexts, and points of view *brought to* the perception of messages.

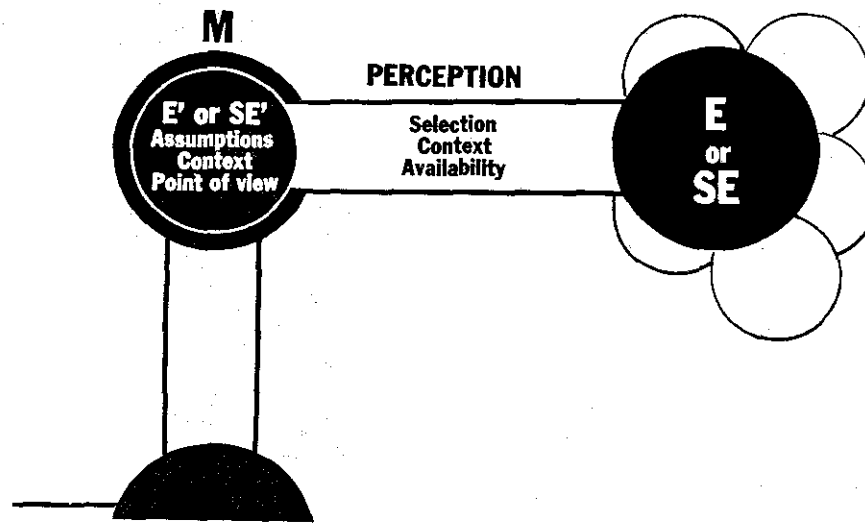


Figure 7

We can now complete our basic diagram of a communication act.

Figure 7 shows that an event (or statement) available in a certain context is selected for perception in terms of the perceiver's assumptions, context, and point of view. The perceiver is also a communicator; he uses some means and controls (channels, media, *etc.*, as I am using language and print on this paper) to produce a statement about the event. In this way the process continues.

Failure to understand terms implicit in our messages may leave us in the dark about what happens, and why, as the exchange goes on. For example, look at the photographs of the same face in Figure 8.

There is more in these pictures than features and poses. Subtle but inescapable

Figure 8

parts of the message include the position of the camera and of the lights. A host of assumptions about the person portrayed are invoked in the perception. Analysis of such messages helps us understand our response to them, and perhaps also the photographer's perspectives.

The pictures in Figure 9 were clipped from newspapers. They appeared in the context of crime stories, but they all portray *a suspect;* they were all taken before a trial. Yet, in that context, with the flash-gun held low and shadows cast upward to put the face literally in an evil light, the verdict of the photographer — and of the unreflecting reader — is hardly in doubt.

Figure 9

In communication we usually do more than we mean to do. Sometimes we do the opposite of what we intend to do. The pictorial statements in Figure 10 illustrate meaning on different levels.

The first statement (A) means to sell liquor. But the picture also conveys (and cultivates) some assumptions about the "good life." It does that from the point of view of the market for high-priced liquor. How refined and jovial it is when everyone knows his brand — and his place.

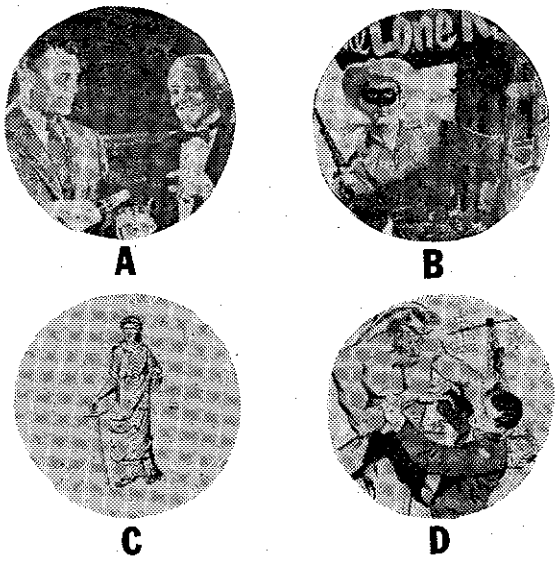


Figure 10

The next image (B) means only to entertain. But no image of the human condition can fail to reveal something about man. A lone, strong, masked man is holding a long gun with gloved finger on the trigger; even if we didn't know him well, a look in his

eyes would tell us that he metes out justice. But so does another figure of Justice (C) wearing a different kind of mask and deriving her strength from different instruments of arbitration. Each image has meaning in terms of its own mythology. We interact with the message as we meet — and cultivate — the assumptions inherent in it.

Look at the beast from another planet (red beast at that, in the original), ready to sink its claws into the flesh of its more human adversary (D). Fantastic, yes. But in a climate of fear, a faked radio documentary reporting an invasion from Mars did trigger large-scale panic among its listeners. In terms of assumptions usually cultivated, nothing could be as fantastic as a landing of Martians bearing lollipops and cookies.

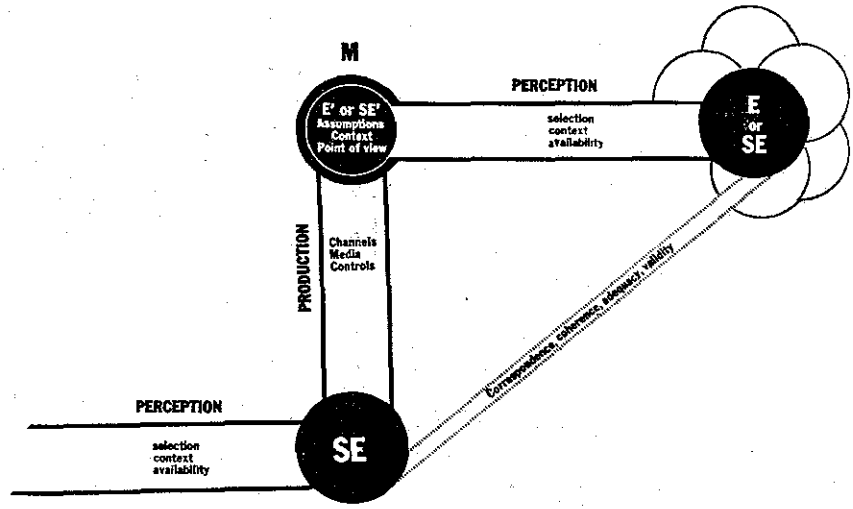
THE JOB OF THE TEACHER

What is the job of the teacher? Is it to cultivate existing assumptions, whatever they might be, in order to put across the desired "message"? This is, in effect, what some lists of "helpful hints" on "effective communication" tell us. This is what much narrowly conceived and superficially interpreted research on communication "effects" tells us. But cultivating existing assumptions in order to put across the desired "message" is manipulation, not education.

Often the teacher cannot honestly convey his message without challenging cherished assumptions. And, at times, unexamined assumptions implicitly reflected in messages counter and negate the explicit "lessons." Therefore, the analysis of messages in teaching first leads to self-analysis: What am I communicating besides what I think I am teaching? Am I talking about "a government of laws and not of men" — but from a Lone Ranger point of view? Do I need monsters to make a unit on space travel or on life on other planets more believable? If so, I may be an "effective" communicator, but I should not be in the classroom. I should not be in the classroom for the simple reason that successfully manipulating people, even into the "right" conclusions, only impoverishes the bases of self-direction and, therefore, negates the aims of education.

People learn best not what their teachers think they teach or what their preachers think they preach, but what their cultures in fact cultivate. We "teach" many things, most of them short-lived. But we cultivate the assumptions, contexts, and points of view in terms of which we communicate all things. These terms are likely to be the most lasting and least examined parts of our lessons. So the questions I ask as I reflect on teaching as a communication process are these: What approach to the subject and to learning itself did I cultivate when I only meant to transmit a few "facts"? What perspectives on man, life, and the world did I present when I only meant to teach English or geography or

Figure 11



math or physics?

THE VALUE LEVEL

These questions bring us to the level of values. That teaching has elements of art, science, and organization is no news to anyone. It should not be surprising, then, that teaching has the values of these activities as humanizing functions in communication.

Let us develop a value-oriented version of our communication model. First, we shall supply a dimension missing from the operational version of the model, but present in every real communication situation: the relationship between the statement (now conceived as a single specific proposition) and what the statement is "about." This is the hypotenuse of our model, shown in Figure 11. This relationship may be characterized by the presence or absence of qualities of correspondence, coherence, adequacy, or validity attributed to the message.

Now let us ask the question: What *should* happen as we interact through messages? What are the desirable, the *humanizing* qualities of each of the three dimensions of our communication model? And how do the functions of organization, science, and art serve these qualities?

Along the perceptual dimension we have selection, context, and availability as operational elements. What do we ask of these? We ask that selection be as *free* as possible, that context be as *representative* as possible, and that availability be as *equitable* as possible. So the ideal (even if troublesome) criterion of value along this

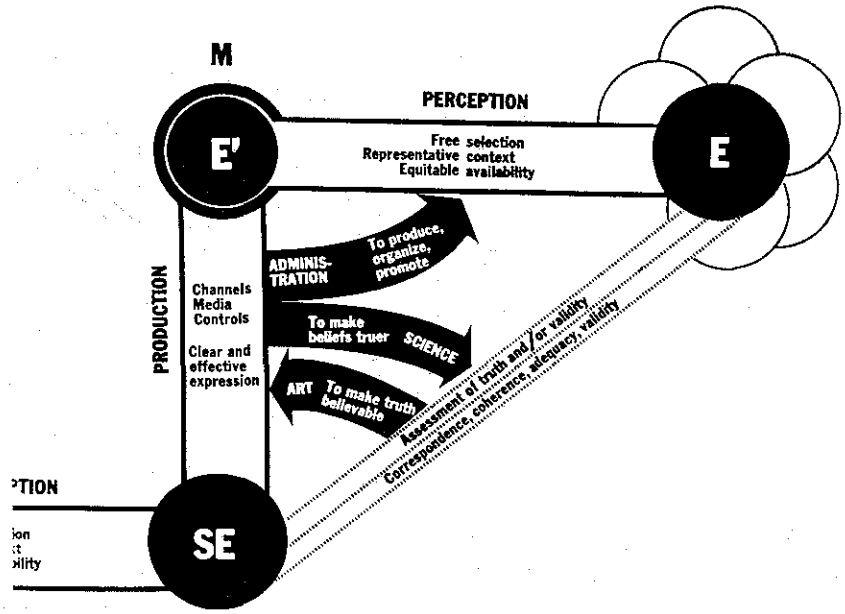


Figure 12

dimension is *free selection in a representative context of pertinent evidence.*

The hypotenuse of our model is the relationship between statements and what statements are "about." Here we consider it desirable to *assess* qualities of *truth and validity* built into our messages.

The production dimension relates the terms of our perception and cognition — our "beliefs" — to the statements we make. Here we want skillful use of channels, media, controls, *etc.* to reflect these "beliefs" in effective forms. We want to produce *clear and believable messages.*

Figure 12 shows these qualities of the three dimensions. It also indicates how the functions of administration, science, and art serve these qualities.

The teacher as administrator and organizer of communication activities uses means, facilities, and controls to promote free selection in a representative context of pertinent evidence. The teacher as scientist assesses the truth qualities of information and the validity of assumptions, contexts, and points of view implicit in statements. The teacher as artist uses his skills and materials to express true and valid beliefs in clear and convincing forms.

Combining the humanizing functions of

administration, science, and art in communication, the teacher thus strives to make choices freer, beliefs truer, and truths more believable.

Scrutiny of communication in the classroom is analysis of messages and processes. It leads, on one hand, to self-analysis, and, on the other, to a concern with the full range of consequences implicit in communication as a humanizing process.

THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Finally, we come to the institutional level. Concrete historical developments give our concern with communication processes and values its urgency and relevance. If it is true that most people learn best what their cultures cultivate, a revolution in culture has brought about a transformation in learning and altered the position of the teacher and the school in society.

The industrial revolution has shifted into the communications phase. Message-systems which provide many of the raw materials of our consciousness (and of the terms of our perceptions) have become mass-produced, institutionalized commodities. Bigness, fewness, and costliness in cultural, as in any other, mass production brought centralization of control, standardization of product, streamlined efficiency of technique. These changes meant increasing penetration of influence into many spheres of life and across many previous boundaries of place, time, and social status. We can safely say that never before could so many people in so many places know and talk so much about the same things at the same time.

The shape of human affairs has changed. Instead of the slow filtering-down process, we have the almost simultaneous introduction of information, ideas, and products at all levels of society. Mass production and distribution of communications to scattered, heterogeneous audiences means potential enrichment of cultural horizons incredible by all previous standards. But it also means that the assumptions, contexts, and points of view which cultivate our perceptions of what is real, what is important, and what is right, now roll off the assembly line bearing a brand name, a corporate image, a marketing approach.

The words of Andrew Fletcher, uttered in 1704, reverberate in the halls of the Academy and, at times, of Congress. "I believe," he said, "that 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 writing of all the ballads.

The mass media have increasingly taken over democratic national responsibilities for transmitting the cultural heritage, for illuminating the realities of today, and for setting the agenda of tomorrow.

How did the mass media fulfill that responsibility? As well as could be expected,

perhaps even better. Being free from public control but lacking guarantees of public support in using that freedom, the mass media must, on the whole, merchandise such gratifications as can be profitably cultivated under the circumstances.

How does formal education find its place and its responsibilities in the new cultural situation? I think we have only begun to diagnose the situation. There is little doubt that we can and should find ways of using the riches available to all for the first time in the history of cultures. It has often been pointed out that we should also help make some order out of the distortions, confusions, and general cultural chaos characterizing the new situation. But all these worthy activities do not go to the heart of the problem.

The new situation is a radical transformation of the ways members of our species became human. Seen in that light, the problem is not only that of tastes, appreciations, discriminating consumership. The problem is also the organization of culture, with all its humanizing functions, both as a public and a private matter. The task is one of citizens' building and molding social institutions for democratic human purposes. We have opportunities to exercise policy choices in the field of popular culture, or to let these choices go by default. The difference is likely to affect our survival as a nation; and, if we survive, it is certain to determine the outcome of our experiment with self-government.

A role education can play in communication on the institutional level is to prepare itself, and the new generation of citizens, to exercise such choices. It makes little difference whether we think about such studies under the heading of Social Science or Citizenship or English or Mass Media. It is more important that they be conceived as part of general education on all levels rather than only as training in the specific applied skills of communication or of consumership.

Such studies should develop ways of observing modern cultural institutions mass-producing images of man, life, and the world, and of the uses we make of them. They should examine circumstances of cultural production and consumption, and consider what kinds of humanizing aims can be fulfilled under what kinds of conditions. These considerations should result in the development of standards for the citizen as well as for the consumer.

I might now summarize my attempt to present a theory of communication and its implications for teaching as follows: The reasons for the emergence of a "communication approach" rest, I believe, in the trends and developments of the last century. Such an approach or theory or discipline makes the nature and role of messages in life and society its central organizing concern. It attempts to analyze

what happens in communication as a teaching process, and to assess the values of what happens. Then the approach turns to the institutional developments from which it sprang. It uses the insights of process and of value to find the place of the school, the role of education, and the responsibilities of the teacher in the new culture in which both we and our students live and grow and learn.

FOR FURTHER READING

Certain aspects and topics in this paper have been developed in greater detail (although in earlier formulations) in the following articles:

Gerbner, George. "The Individual in a Mass Culture," *Saturday Review*, XLIII (June 18, 1960), 11-13, 36-37. Also (abridged) in *The Executive*, IV (1960), 14-16, and *The National Elementary Principal*, XL (February, 1961), 49-54.

_____. "Education and the Challenge of Mass Culture," *Audio-Visual Communication Review*, VII (Fall, 1959), 264-278.

_____. "Content Analysis and Critical Research in Mass Communication," *Audio-Visual Communication Review*, VI (Spring, 1958), 85-108.

_____. "Toward a General Model of Communication," *Audio-Visual Communication Review*, IV (Sumner, 1956, 171-199.

The following sources may be useful to those interested in further exploration of the perceptual aspects, especially the "window" and other similar demonstrations.

Cantril, Hadley. *The "Why" of Man's Experience*. New York: Macmillan, 1950.

Kilpatrick, Franklin P. (ed.). *Explorations in Transactional Psychology*. New York: New York University Press, 1961.