

# McQuail's Reader in Mass Communication Theory

---

Edited by

---

Denis McQuail



SAGE Publications  
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

2002

# 2

## a cultural approach to communication

JAMES W. CAREY

When I decided some years ago seriously to read the literature of communications, a wise man suggested I begin with John Dewey. It was advice I have never regretted accepting. While there are limitations to Dewey—his literary style was described by William James as damnable—there is a depth to his work, a natural excess common to seminal minds, that offers permanent complexities, and paradoxes over which to puzzle—surely something absent from most of our literature.

Dewey opens an important chapter in *Experience and Nature* with the seemingly preposterous claim that 'Of all things communication is the most wonderful.' What could he have meant by that? If we interpret the sentence literally, it must be either false or mundane. Surely most of the news and entertainment we receive over the mass media is of the order that Thoreau predicted for the international telegraph: 'the intelligence that Princess Adelaide had the whooping cough.' A daily visit with the *New York Times* is not quite so trivial, though it is an experience more depressing than wonderful. Moreover, most of one's encounters with others are wonderful only in moments of excessive masochism. Dewey's sentence, by any reasonable interpretation, is either false to everyday experience or simply mundane if he means only that on some occasions communication is satisfying and rewarding.

In another place Dewey offers an equally enigmatic comment on communication: 'Society exists not only *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication.'<sup>1</sup> What is the significance of the shift in prepositions? Is Dewey claiming that societies distribute information, to speak rather too anthropomorphically, and that by such transactions and the channels of communication peculiar to them, society is made possible? That is certainly a reasonable claim but we hardly need social scientists and philosophers to tell us so. It rather reminds me of Robert Nisbet's acid remark that if you need sociologists to inform you whether or not you have a ruling class, you surely don't. But if this transparent interpretation is rejected, are there any guarantees that after peeling back layers of semantic complexity anything more substantial will be revealed?

I think there are, for the body of Dewey's work reveals a substantial and subtle mind. Rather than quoting him ritualistically—for the lines I have cited regularly appear without comment or interpretation in our literature—we would be better advised to untangle this underlying complexity for the light it might cast upon contemporary studies. I think this complexity derives from Dewey's use of communication in two quite different senses. Better than most of us, he understood that communication has had two contrasting definitions in the history of Western thought and he used the conflict between these definitions as a source of creative tension in his work. This same conflict led him, not surprisingly, into some of his characteristic errors. Rather than blissfully repeating his insights or unconsciously duplicating his errors, we might extend his thought by seizing upon the same contradiction he perceived in our use of the term 'communication' and use it in turn as a device for vivifying our studies.

There have been two alternative conceptions of communication alive in American culture since this term entered common discourse in the 19th century. Both definitions derive, as with much in secular culture, from religious origins, though they refer back

<sup>1</sup>First published in *Communication*, 2, 1975: 1-22, Gordon & Breach Publishers (1975) as 'A Cultural Approach to Communication', pp. 1-10, 17-21.

to somewhat different regions of religious experience. We might label these descriptions, if only to provide handy pegs upon which to hang our thought, a transmission view of communication and a ritual view of communication.

The transmission view of communication is the commonest in our culture, perhaps in all industrial cultures, and dominates contemporary dictionary entries under the term. It is defined by terms such as imparting, sending, transmitting, or giving information to others. It is formed off a metaphor of geography or transportation. In the 19th century, though to a lesser extent today, the movement of goods or people and the movement of information were seen as essentially identical processes and both were described by the common noun 'communication.' The center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control. It is a view of communication that derives from one of the most ancient of human dreams: the desire to increase the speed and effect of messages as they travel in space. From the time upper and lower Egypt were unified under the First Dynasty, down through the invention of the telegraph, transportation and communication were inseparably linked. While messages might be centrally produced and controlled, through monopolization of writing or the rapid production of print, these messages, carried in the hands of a messenger or between the bindings of a book, still had to be distributed, if they were to have their desired effect, by rapid transportation. Telegraph ended the identity but it did not destroy the metaphor. Our basic orientation to communication remains grounded, at the deepest roots of our thinking, in the idea of transmission: communication is a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people.

I said this view originated in religion, though the above sentences seem more indebted to politics, economics and technology. Nonetheless, the roots of the transmission view of communication, in our culture at least, lie in essentially religious attitudes. I can illustrate this by a devious and, in terms of historical detail, inadequate path.

In its modern dress the transmission view of communication arises, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* will attest, at the onset of the age of exploration and discovery. We have been reminded rather too often that the motives behind this vast movement in space were political and mercantile. Certainly those motives were present, but their importance should not obscure the equally compelling fact that a major motive behind this movement in space, particularly as evidenced by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa or the Puritans in New England, was religious. The desire to escape the boundaries of Europe, to create a New Life, to found new communities, to carve a New Jerusalem out of the woods of Massachusetts, these were primary motives behind the unprecedented movement of white, European civilization over virtually the entire globe. The vast and, for the first time, democratic migration in space was above all an attempt to trade an old world for a new, and represented the profound belief that movement in space could be in itself a redemptive act. It is a belief Americans have never quite escaped.

Transportation, particularly when it brought the Christian community of Europe into contact with the heathen community of the Americas, was seen as a form of communication with profoundly religious implication. This movement in space was an attempt to establish and extend the kingdom of God, to create the conditions under

which Godly understanding might be realized, to produce a heavenly though still terrestrial city.

[...]

Soon, as the forces of science and secularization gain ground, the obvious religious metaphors fall away and the technology of communication itself moves to the center of thought. Moreover, the superiority of communication to transportation was assured by the observation of one 19th century commentator that the telegraph was important because it involved not the mere 'modification of matter but the transmission of thought.' Communication was viewed as a process and as a technology that would, sometimes for religious purposes, spread, transmit, and disseminate knowledge, ideas, information further and faster with the end of controlling space and people.

There were dissenters, of course, but they were few, and the transmission view of communication, albeit in increasingly secularized and scientific form, has dominated our thought and culture since that time. Moreover, as can be seen in contemporary popular commentary and even in technical discussions of new communications technology, the historic religious undercurrent has never been eliminated from our thought. From the telegraph to the computer the same sense of profound possibility for moral improvement is present whenever these machines are invoked. And we need not be reminded of the regularity with which improved communication is invoked by an army of teachers, preachers and columnists as the talisman of all our troubles. More controversially, the same root attitudes, as I here can but assert rather than demonstrate, are at work in most of our scientifically sophisticated views of communication.

The ritual view of communication, while a minor thread in our national thought, is by far the older of those views, old enough in fact for dictionaries to list it under 'Archaic.' In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith. This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms commonness, communion, community, and communication. A ritual view of communication is not directed toward the extension of messages in space but the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.

If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control, the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony which draws persons together in fellowship and commonality.

The indebtedness of the ritual view of communication to religion is apparent in the name chosen to label it. Moreover, it derives from a view of religion that downplays the role of the sermon, the instruction and admonishment, in order to highlight the role of the prayer, the chant, and the ceremony. It does not see the original or highest manifestation of communication in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world which can serve as a control and container for human action.

While this view has also been shorn of its explicitly religious origins, it also has never completely escaped its metaphoric root. Writers in this tradition often trace their heritage, in part, to Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and to the argument

stated elsewhere that 'society substitutes for the world revealed to our senses a different world that is a projection of the ideals created by the community.' This projection of community ideals and their embodiment in material form—dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech—creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order which operates not to provide information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process.

The ritual view of communication has not been a dominant motif in American scholarship. Our thought and work has been glued to a transmission view of communication because this view is congenial with the underlying well-springs of American culture, sources which feed into our scientific life as well as our common, public understandings. There is an irony in this. We have not explored the ritual view of communication because the concept of culture is such a weak and evanescent notion in American social thought. We understand that other people have culture in the anthropological sense and we regularly record it—often mischievously and patronizingly. But when we turn critical attention to American culture the concept dissolves into a residual category useful only when psychological and sociological data are exhausted. We realize that the underprivileged live in a culture of poverty, use the notion of middle-class culture as an epithet, and occasionally applaud our high and generally scientific culture. But the notion of culture is not a hard edged term of intellectual discourse for domestic purposes. This intellectual aversion to the idea of culture derives in part from our obsessive individualism which makes psychological life the paramount reality, from our Puritanism which leads to a disdain for the significance of human activity that is not practical and work oriented, and from our isolation of science from culture: science provides culture-free truth where culture provides ethnocentric error.

Consequently, when looking for scholarship that emphasizes the central role of culture and a ritual view of communication, one must heavily rely on European sources or upon Americans deeply influenced by European scholarship. As a result the opportunities for misunderstanding are great. Perhaps then some of the difference between a transmission and ritual view of communication can be grasped by briefly looking at alternative conceptions of the role of the newspaper in social life.

If one examines a newspaper under a transmission view of communication, one sees the medium as an instrument for disseminating news and knowledge, sometimes diver-tissement, in larger and larger packages over greater distances. Questions arise as to the effects of this on audiences: news as enlightening or obscuring reality, as changing or hardening attitudes, as breeding credibility or doubt. Questions are also raised concerning the functions of news and the newspaper: Does it maintain the integration of society or its maladaptation? Does it function or malfunction to maintain stability or promote the instability of personalities? Some such mechanical analysis normally accompanies a 'transmission' argument.

A ritual view of communication will focus on a different range of problems in examining a newspaper. It will, for example, view reading a newspaper less as sending or gaining information and more like attending a mass: a situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. News reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one.

What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world. Moreover, as the reader makes his way through the paper, he engages in a continual shift of roles or of dramatic focus. A story on the monetary crisis salutes him as American patriots fighting those ancient enemies Germany and Japan; a story on the meeting of the women's political caucus casts him into the liberation movement as supporter or opponent; a tale of violence on the campus evokes his class antagonisms and resentments. The model here is not that of information acquisition, though such acquisition occurs, but of dramatic action in which the reader joins a world of contending forces as an observer at a play. We do not encounter questions about the effect or functions of messages as such, but the role of presentation and involvement in the structuring of the reader's life and time. We recognize, as with religious rituals, news changes little and yet is intrinsically satisfying; it performs few functions yet is habitually consumed. Newspapers do not operate as a source of effects or functions but as dramatically satisfying, which is not to say pleasing, presentations of what the world at root is. And it is in this role, that of a text, that a newspaper is seen; like a Balinese cockfight, a Dickens novel, an Elizabethan drama, a student rally, it is a presentation of reality that gives to life an overall form, order, and tone.

Moreover, news is a historic reality. It is a form of culture invented by a particular class at a particular point of history—in this case by the middle class largely in the 18th century. Like any invented cultural form, news both forms and reflects a particular 'hunger for experience'—a desire to do away with the epic, heroic, and traditional in favor of the unique, original, novel, new—news. This 'hunger' itself has a history grounded in the changing style and fortunes of the middle class and, as such, does not represent a universal taste or necessarily legitimate form of knowledge, but an invention in historical time that like most other human inventions will dissolve when the class that sponsors it and its possibility of having significance for us evaporates.

Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama; it does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time, and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it.

Now neither of these counterposed views of communication necessarily denies what the other affirms. A ritual view does not exclude the processes of information transmission or attitude change. It merely contends that one cannot understand these processes aright except insofar as they are cast within an essentially ritualistic view of communication and social order. Similarly, even writers indissolubly wedded to the transmission view of communication must include some notion such as Malinowski's phatic communion to attest however tardily to the place of ritual action in social life. Nonetheless, in intellectual matters origins determine endings, and the exact point at which one attempts to unhinge the problem of communication largely determines the path his analysis can follow.

The power of Dewey's work derives from his working over these counterpoised views of communication. Communication is 'the most wonderful' because it is the basis of human fellowship; it produces the social bonds which tie men together and make associated life possible. Society is possible because of the binding forces of shared information circulating in an organic system. The following quotation reveals this tension and Dewey's final emphasis on a ritual view of communication:

There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common ... are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding—likeness as sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces. ... Consensus demands communication.<sup>2</sup>

Dewey was, like the rest of us, often untrue to his own thought. His hopes for the future often overwhelmed the impact of his analysis. Ah! 'the wish is father to the thought.' He came to overvalue scientific information and communication technology as a solvent to social problems and a source of social bonds. Nonetheless, the tension between these views can still open up a range of significant problems in communication, for they represent not merely different conceptions of communication but correspond to particular historical periods, technologies, and forms of social order.

The transmission view of communication has dominated American thought since the 1920s. When I first came into this field I felt that this view of communication, expressed in behavioral and functional terms, was exhausted. It had become academic: a repetition of past achievement, a demonstration of the indubitable. While it led to solid achievement, it could no longer go forward without disastrous intellectual and social consequences. I felt it was necessary to reopen the analysis, to reinvigorate it with the tension found in Dewey's work and, above all, to go elsewhere into biology, theology, anthropology, and literature for some intellectual material with which we might escape the treadmill we were running.

[...]

To study communication is to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended, and used. Described this way some scholars would dismiss it as insufficiently empirical. My own view is the opposite, for I see it as an attempt to sweep away our existing notions concerning communication which serve only to devitalize our data. Our attempts to construct, maintain, repair, and transform reality are publicly observable activities which occur in historical time. We create, express, and convey our knowledge of and attitudes toward reality through the construction of a variety of symbol systems: art, science, journalism, religion, common sense, mythology. How do we do this? What are the differences between these forms? What are the historical and comparative variations in them? How do changes in communication technology influence what we can concretely create and apprehend? How do groups in society struggle over the definition of what is real? These are some of the questions, rather too simply put, that communication studies must answer.

Finally, let me emphasize an ironic aspect to the study of communication, a way in which our subject matter doubles back on itself and presents us with a host of ethical problems. One of the activities in which we characteristically engage, as in this essay, is communication about communication itself. However, communication is not some pure phenomenon we can discover; there is no such thing as communication to be revealed in nature through some objective method free from the corruption of culture. We understand

communication insofar as we are able to build models or representations of this process. But our models of communication—like all models—have this dual aspect—an 'of aspect and a 'for' aspect. In one mode communication models tell us what the process is; in their second mode they produce the behavior they have described. Communication can be modeled in several empirically adequate ways, but these several models have quite different ethical implications for they produce quite different forms of social relations.

Let us face this dilemma directly. There is nothing in our genes that tells us how to create and execute those activities we summarize under the term communication. If we are to engage in this activity—writing an essay, making a film, entertaining an audience, imparting information and advice—we must discover models in our culture that tell us how this particular miracle is achieved. Such models are found in common sense, law, religious traditions, increasingly in scientific theories themselves. Traditionally, models of communication were found in religious thought. For example, in describing the roots of the transmission view of communication in 19th century American religious thought, I meant to imply the following: religious thought not only described communication; it also presented a model for the appropriate uses of language, the forms of human contact permissible, the ends communication should serve, the motives it should manifest. It taught what it meant to display.

Today models of communication are found less in religion than in science, but their implications are the same. For example, American social science has generally represented communication, within an overarching transmission view, in terms of either a power or an anxiety model. These correspond roughly to what is found in information theory, learning theory, and influence theory (power), and dissonance, balance theory, and functionalism or uses and gratifications analysis (anxiety). I cannot here adequately explicate these views but they reduce the extraordinary phenomenological diversity of communication into an arena where men alternately pursue power or flee anxiety. And one need only monitor the behavior of modern institutions to see the degree to which these models create through policy and program the abstract motives and relations they portray.

Models of communication are, then, not only representations of communication but representations for communication: templates which guide, unavailing or no, concrete processes of human interaction, mass and interpersonal. Therefore, to study communication involves examining the construction, apprehension, and use of models of communication themselves. Their construction in common sense, art, and science, their historically specific creation and use: in encounters between parent and child, advertiser and consumer, welfare worker and supplicant, teacher and student. Behind and within these encounters lie models of human contact and interaction.

Our models of communication, consequently, create what we disingenuously pretend they merely describe. As a result our science is, to use a term of Alvin Gouldner's, a reflexive one. We not only describe behavior; we create a particular corner of culture: culture that determines, in part, the kind of communicative world we inhabit.

Raymond Williams, whose analysis I shall follow in conclusion, speaks to the point:

Communication begins in the struggle to learn and to describe. To start this process in our minds and to pass on its results to others, we depend on certain communication models, certain rules or conventions through which we can make contact. We can change these

models when they become inadequate or we can modify and extend them. Our efforts to do so, and to use the existing models successfully, take up a large part of our living energy. ... Moreover, many of our communication models become, in themselves, social institutions. Certain attitudes to others, certain forms of address, certain tones and styles become embodied in institutions which are then very powerful in social effect ... arguable assumptions are often embodied in solid, practical institutions which then teach the models from which they start.<sup>3</sup>

This relation between science and society described by Williams has not been altogether missed by the public and accounts for some of the widespread interest in communication. I am not speaking merely of the contemporary habit of reducing all human problems to problems or failures in communication. Let us recognize the habit for what it is: an attempt to coat reality with clichés, to provide a semantic crucifix to ward off modern vampires. But our appropriate cynicism should not deflect us from discovering the kernel of truth in such phrases.

If we follow Dewey it will occur to us that problems of communication are linked to problems of community, to problems surrounding the kinds of communities we create and in which we live. For the ordinary person, communication consists merely of a set of daily activities: having conversations, conveying instructions, being entertained, sustaining debate and discussion, acquiring information. The felt quality of our lives is bound up with these activities and how they are carried on within communities.

Our minds and lives are shaped by our total experience, or better, by representations of experience and, as Raymond Williams has argued, a name for this experience is communication. If one tries to examine society as a form of communication, he sees it as a process whereby reality is created, shared, modified, and preserved. When this process goes opaque, when we lack models of and for reality that make the world apprehensible, when we are unable to describe it and share it, when because of a failure in our models of communication we are unable to connect with others, one encounters problems of communication in their most potent form.

The widespread social interest in communication derives from a derangement in our models of communication and community. And this derangement derives, in turn, from an obsessive commitment to a transmission view of communication and the derivative representation of communication in complementary models of power and anxiety. As a result, when we think about society, we are almost always coerced by our traditions into seeing it as a network of power, administration, decision, and control—as a political order. Alternatively, we have seen society essentially as relations of property, production, and trade—an economic order. But social life is more than power and trade (and it is more than therapy as well). As Raymond Williams has argued, it also includes the sharing of aesthetic experience, religious ideas, personal values and sentiments, and intellectual notions—a ritual order.

Our existing models of communication are less an analysis than a contribution to the chaos of modern culture and we are, in important ways, paying the penalty for the long abuse of fundamental communicative processes in the service of politics, trade, and therapy. Three examples. Because we have looked at each new advance in communications technology as opportunities for politics and economics, we have devoted them, almost exclusively, to matters of government and trade. We have rarely

seen them as opportunities to expand man's powers to learn and exchange ideas and experience. Because we have looked at education principally in terms of its potential for economics and politics, we have turned it into a form of citizenship, professionalism and consumerism, and increasingly therapy. Because we have seen our cities as the domain of politics and economics, they have become the residence of technology and bureaucracy. Our streets are designed to accommodate the automobile, our sidewalks to facilitate trade, our land and houses to satisfy the economy and the real estate speculator.

The object, then, of recasting our studies of communication in terms of a ritual model is not only to more firmly grasp the essence of this 'wonderful' process, but to give us a way in which to rebuild a model of and for communication of some restorative value in reshaping our common culture.

#### NOTES

- 1 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 5.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
- 3 Raymond Williams, *Communications* (London: Chatto and Windus, rev. edn, 1966), pp. 19-20.