

**WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?**  
**UNSETTLING A PRIORI AND A POSTERIORI APPROACHES**

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## **Abstract**

We argue that the ways in which communication scholars explicitly or implicitly define and characterize communication, the terminologies used and the assumptions employed, guide the ways in which they define and utilize communication theories and practices. We provide a systematization of the diverse definitions and understandings of communication, proposing a “widening metatheoretical framework,” a broad classificatory scheme. Taking into account the interpretation of communication as essence or appearance, we classify communication definitions as a priori or a posteriori, as essentializing or as questioning preestablished communicative patterns. Considering the approach of communication as static or dynamic, we classify a priori communication definitions into product and process, and considering the approach of communication as cultural or political, we categorize a posteriori communication definitions as ritual and praxis. Then, we discuss the forms and implications of a priori communication definitions, planning to explore a posteriori definitions of communication in a further study, in an attempt to unsettle the ways in which “What is communication?” is asked and answered.

### **1. Introduction**

In his article “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” Paul Ricoeur (1971) asserts:

In front of the court, the plurivocity common to texts and to actions is exhibited in the form of a conflict of interpretations, and the final interpretation appears as a verdict to which it is possible to make appeal. Like legal utterances, all interpretations in the field of literary criticism and in the social sciences may be challenged, and the question ‘what can defeat a claim’ is common to all argumentative situations. Only in the tribunal is there a moment when the procedures of appeal are exhausted. But it is because the decision of the judge is implemented by the force of the public power. Neither in literary criticism, nor in the social sciences, is there such a last word. Or if there is any, we call that violence. (p.215)

Theoretical formulations of communication and in communication have been viewed by scholars as compatible or incompatible, as convergent or divergent, as supporting one another or competing against one another. Theoretical speculations about communication issues and in communication studies have become institutionalized or have attacked institutionalization, have become canonical or have fought against canonization, have become mainstream or have claimed marginality. We argue that communication scholars and students are called to critically appraise a multitude of theoretical perspectives, without trying to give final verdicts and to make ultimate judgments, without trying to establish the absolute hierarchy, that is, without pronouncing a last word.

We propose a systematization of the diverse and, in many respects, divergent definitions and understandings of the concept of communication, by providing a proposing a “widening metatheoretical framework,” or a broad classificatory scheme. While we do not consider our systematization as either the only possible or the definitive one, we believe that it has merits for two main reasons: (a) it approaches communication issues by comparison within the discipline and across disciplines, thus promoting critical thinking; and (b) it discusses communication problems by contrast between the dominant views, of majority and/or Western groups, and undervalued ones, of minority and/or non-Western groups.

## **2. What is Communication?**

According to John Durham Peters (1999), the Latin word *communicatio*, rooted in *communicare* meaning “to impart, share or make common” as well as in *munus* meaning “gifts or duties offered publicly,” “did not signify the general arts of human connection via symbols, nor did it suggest the hope for some kind of mutual recognition,” but “generally involved tangibles,” stylistic devices employed by an orator to assume “the hypothetical voice of the adversary or audience” (p.7). The notion of communication in ancient Rome, as well as the previous notion of rhetoric in ancient Greece, did not refer to transfer, to transmission, to interaction or to dialogue, but rather pointed to acknowledging and performing specific social functions and group memberships, or to knowing and utilizing concrete technical devices for conveying specific social functions and group memberships.

There are several paradoxes derived from the disconnection between the understandings of communication in the Greek-Roman antiquity, usually considered the foundation of Western thought, and in the modern Western world, as well as from the disconnections between views of communication in the European-North American space and in the rest of the world. Some communication scholars affirm that communication is an old occurrence, beginning in prehistoric cave paintings (Schramm, 1988), whereas other communication scholars state that communication is a modern invention, rooted in nineteenth century ideologies and technologies (Mattelart, 1996). Some communication theorists and researchers view communication as a pervasive phenomenon, identifiable in humans as well as animals, in all times and all places (Budd & Ruben, 1972), whereas some other communication theorists and researchers view communication as a particular endeavor of current, Western humans (Schiller, 1996). Specialists in the field of communication maintain that communication is the basis of individual and social formation and transformation, the core of anthropological and social studies (de Sola Pool et al,

1973), whereas academics in other areas of the social sciences hardly recognize communication among important cultural and social processes (Honigmann, 1973; Ritzer & Smart, 2001).

Communication has been considered a complex concept deserving to be examined, or a tautology not deserving to be accounted for. In our effort to sort out what communication is, and what communication scholars believe that communication is, we have discerned several categories of communication definitions, and several types of metatheoretical frameworks for communication definitions. We distinguish between *explicit definitions of communication*, or stated and justified position statements on communication, and *implicit definitions of communication*, or unstated and unjustified, yet taken-for-granted and utilized positions on communication. Within the category of explicit communication definitions, we separate *unproblematized definitions*, aimed at describing or prescribing, and *problematized definitions*, which question or challenge. We also distinguish between *narrowing metatheoretical frameworks*, trying to reduce all communication definitions to one, and *widening metatheoretical frameworks*, trying to group series of communication definitions into categories. We advocate for explicit definitions of communication, for the exposure rather than the obfuscation of assumptions in communication theory and research, as well as for widening metatheoretical frameworks, for accepting diversity rather than for forcefully attempting unification.

Numerous books and articles in communication studies have offered and discussed explicit definitions of communication, describing its nature or prescribing its essence (DeVito, 1982), or, on the contrary, questioning its essentiality or naturality (Stepherd et al, 2006), as well as describing its uses and prescribing its functions (Berger & Chaffee, 1987) or, on the contrary, challenging its misuses and malfunctions (Simpson, 1994). However, many materials in the field have entailed implicit definitions of communication, employing worldviews, research

methodologies and sets of values that pertain to a taken-for-granted and reified definition without actually disclosing or stating the definition. As Michael T. Motley (1990) asserts, “definitions of communication seem invariably to be controversial,” yet “while debates over definitions of communication were once fairly common on convention programs and in the literature, they seem more rare these days” (p.1). Or, as John Durham Peters (1999) writes, “Rarely has any idea been so infested with platitudes. Communication is good, mutuality is good, more sharing is better: these seemingly obvious dicta, because unexamined, sweep too much under the rug” (p.6). Numerous communication scholars seem to complacently accept the manufacturing of consent on communication definitions and issues.

Communication metatheorists have tried to provide frameworks for categorizing and classifying communication definitions and issues, either by reducing all existing ones to an essential one, or by associating the existing ones in clusters. The narrowing trend in framing communication has started with the search for a simple and effective formula or scheme explaining each and every communication act, for example Lasswell’s model addressing “who says what in which channel to whom with what effect” (Lasswell, 1948), and Shannon and Weaver’s mathematical models addressing the components of a communication transmission (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). This approach continues now with searches for universal definitions of communication acts, or proposals of fixed sets of general characteristics of communication phenomena (for example, symbolic process, social process, co-orientation, individual interpretation, shared meaning and context, in Infante et al, 2003, pp.9-12). The widening trend in framing communication might be said to have started with the effort to document a variety of communication definitions, and then to group them according to commonalities and differences. For example, Bernard Berelson (1959) identified eight typical propositions used by communication scholars to define communication, whereas Frank Dance and Carl Larson (1976)

identified 126 existing definitions of communication, and analyzed the 11 of them they considered highly significant. More recently, Stephen Littlejohn (2002) has used a behaviorist framework in conceptualizing a nine element table of communication definitions, combining source behavior (unintentional behavior, intentional nonverbal behavior and intentional verbal behavior) with receiver behavior (not received, received incidentally and attended to).

We consider that, while the narrowing approach was useful for some strands of communication research for assessing the commonalities of communication definitions, it is deficient because it is based on a dominant and essentialized conception of communication, the processual one. We also consider that, while the frameworks of Berelson (1959), Dance and Larson (1976), and Littlejohn (2002) are valuable for shifting from the narrow to the widening trend, they are debatable because they are still grounded in unproblematized assumptions about communication processes (source, message, channel, receiver), intentionality and behavior. We propose a metatheoretical framework that groups communication definitions in clusters, rather than reducing communication definitions to one, and that compares and contrasts communication definitions within and across clusters, rather than forcing them into one set of assumptions. We propose a categorization that examines both the unity and the diversity of each cluster, both its specific features and its flexibility, and that provides concomitantly a systematic account and a wide array of perspectives. We propose a framework of communication definitions that integrates as well as confronts, that correlates as well as provokes, that not only classifies but also critiques communication premises, that not only categorizes but also evaluates communication presuppositions.

Our framework approaches communication at the intersection of several trends. Taking into account the interpretation of communication as essence or as appearance, we classify communication definitions as *a priori* or as *a posteriori*, as “received” or as constructed, as

essentializing preestablished communicative patterns or as questioning prefabricated communicative models. Considering the approach of communication as static or dynamic, we classify *a priori communication definitions* into *product* and *process*, and considering the approach of communication as cultural or political, we categorize *a posteriori communication definitions* as *ritual* and *praxis*. Then, we discuss in detail the forms and implications of a priori definitions of and approaches to communication, planning to explore a posteriori definitions of and takes on communication in a further study, in an attempt to unsettle the ways in which “What is communication?” is asked and answered..

### **3. Toward a Typology of Communication**

#### **a. A Priori Communication**

In his book *Perspectives on Human Communication*, Aubrey Fisher (1978) makes the following considerations on the status of communication, on the relationships between communication acts and human beings:

[...] nearly all of us will agree that we can and do recognize communication as communication when we see it in the real world [...] few people disagree, broadly speaking, on the identity of the phenomenon called communication. But many will disagree on the crucial properties that constitute the phenomenon.

An analogy might aid in clarifying further this distinction [...] Consider a physical object such as an automobile. An auto mechanic observing the automobile sees a finely tuned mechanism consisting of an internal combustion engine, a transmission, steering linkages, brakes, and so on. A commuter observes a mode of transportation that is expensive and difficult to park but convenient. An avid environmentalist sees a pollution-generating monster created and sustain by a technical society. An antique buff sees the classic styling and engineering of a nonduplicated era in auto manufacturing.

A completely thorough understanding, of course, would involve all the definitions being employed – one at a time or in combinations. [...] *The phenomenon of communication is a constant. It does not change. Only our understanding of it changes.* (p.9)

Fisher, along with numerous other communication theorists, views communication as something given that preexists our interpretations of communication, as something definitive that shapes our experiences of communication. In this perspective of communication as a priori or as “received,” the car exists, communication exists, followed by our perceptions of what exists, a



posteriori, as we decipher the car or communication differently, according to the particularities of our interests and our skills. It is interesting that Fisher attempted to complement a scientific approach to communication with a humanistic one, and the mechanistic and psychological perspectives on communication with the interactional and the pragmatic ones, yet he held the widespread, scientific and mechanistic belief in communication as a priori, as “received,” as solid and unchangeable.

This conception of communication is rooted in an extension of a metaphysical creed to a suprasocial one, the extension of the ancient formalist-rationalist belief that physical appearances are exterior to and independent from human beings, and that each class of physical appearances corresponds to a metaphysical essence, to the functionalist-empiricist belief that social appearances are external to and autonomous from human beings, and that each class of social appearances converges in a suprasocial essence. This conception of communication is encountered in various authors of different orientations in the past 100 years, in proponents as well as in opponents of functionalism and empiricism, in theorists as well as metatheorists, and in researchers as well as methodologists (Gitlin, 1978; Giddens, 1989), and is overtly and covertly dominant in the discipline of communication.

It is not accidental that scholars like Walter Lippmann (1922) and Talcott Parsons (1937), founding figures of communication science and of sociology in the Western world, relied on the Platonic hierarchical model of appearances and essences, as well as on the Platonic elitist model of the king-philosopher, in order to formulate hierarchical models of social and communicational realities, as well as elitist models of social knowledge and governance. Lippmann mentions Plato’s myth of the cave (1922, p.5) in support of his theory of “the pictures in our heads,” his conception that there is a world outside, and then there are more or less accurate human approximations of this world, that there is a real environment, and then there are fictive pseudo-

environments which regular people inhabit and which social leaders need to amend and correct. Parsons mentions Neoplatonic philosophies (1937, pp.64-66) in support of his structure of social action, his theory that there is a facticity of the social realm, and then there are incorrect or erroneous understandings of social facts, his theory that there are data and then there are ignorance and error, happening due to the absence of adequate knowledge and action, and avoided through good science and fair policy. For Lippmann and Parsons, there is an essence of communication and an essence of society, preceding any communicative and social act.

The view of communication as a priori, as an essence represented in communicative appearances, or as an absolute approximated in communicative acts, has permeated and continues to permeate the field of communication. Many of the definitions discussed by Dance and Larson (1976) reproduce such a view and terminology: “communication occurs whenever an individual assigns significance or meaning to an internal or external stimulus” (Thayer, 1961, p.43); “communication is a process by which a person reduces the uncertainty about some state of affairs by the detection of cues which seem to him relevant to that state of affairs” (Lewis, 1963); communication is “a creative act initiated by man in which he seeks to discriminate and organize cues so as to orient himself in his environment and satisfy his changing needs” (Barnlund, 1968, p.156). In the first issue of *Communication Yearbook*, David Berlo (1977) wrote that “Message events are natural events; however, the communicative significance is not natural. It is symbolic” (p.19), and in the “Ferment in the Field” issue of the *Journal of Communication*, Wilbur Schramm (1983) wrote that “It is illuminating to think about communication as a *relationship built around the exchange of information*” (p.16). Currently, many theoretical and applicative books and articles uncritically adopt this view.

In the following sections of this study, we examine the main versions of a priori communication. *Communication as product*, a static perspective considering only the finite and

taken-in-possession outcomes of communicative acts as communication, encompasses three types of views: *communication as information*, commodifying the message communicated, *communication as behavior*, essentializing the human communicators, and *communication as medium*, commodifying the channels of communication. *Communication as process*, a modification or relative of the communication as product perspective, focusing on the acts transpiring linearly across the source, message, channel, receiver products, considering only the serial exchange between a sender to a receiver as communication, incorporates three types of views: *communication as transmission*, commodifying the information transfer, *communication as stimulus-response*, essentializing the human transaction, and *communication as cause-effect*, commodifying the intermediation.

*b. A Posteriori Communication*

In his book *Deconstructing Communication*, Briankle Chang (1996) makes the following comments on the differences between the status of communication in other modern and contemporary theories and the significance of communication in his study:

I offer a systematic critique of this notion of communication as it is articulated differentially and often obliquely within modern communication theories. I argue that the conceptualization of communication as the 'transcendence of difference,' reasonable as it may seem at first, reflects an implicit subjectivist thesis – what I call the 'ideology of the communicative' – to which modern communication theories remain heavily mortgaged, notwithstanding the varying forms these theories may assume across rigidly demarcated disciplinary boundaries. I argue that this implicit subjectivist thesis causes communication theorists to view communicative events as moments within a teleological process, a foreclosing dialectic, eventually leading them to their unquestioned valorization of identity over difference, of the selfsame over Alterity, of dialogue over polylogue, and most important, of understanding and the determination of meaning over *misunderstanding* and undecidability. My book contests this romantic view of communication as organized exchange and advocates an inverted image of communication as the occurrence of Babel-like, *adestinal* sending (*envoi*). (p.xii)

Chang views communication as an openness, not because humans cannot predict its predetermined trajectories and cannot grasp its preexisting forms, but rather because it has no predetermined trajectories and preexisting forms. Chang views communication as a multiplicity, not because an ego can participate in a dialogic or dialectic exchange with an alter, but because all identity can be difference and all dialogue can become polylogue. Chang critiques the

perspective of communication as a priori or “received,” as fixated in an objective reality, that is given and fixed, but as bound to a subjective perception, that is personal and unsafe. Chang promotes a view of communication as a posteriori or constructed, as freed from both essentiality and subjectivity, as liberated from teleology or from determination. In this view, communication is neither associated with correctness nor connected with appropriateness, but rather associated with lack of correct viewpoint and of appropriate stand.

In terms of provenience, this view of communication as a posteriori or as constructed does not maintain a link with one type of conceptualization, with one school of thought, but rather it has a connection with a wide array of orientations, with a variety of trends: it is related, among others, with a pragmatist approach considering that human enterprises are socio-cultural rather than metaphysical, and that communicative acts are practical rather than rational (Ayer, 1968; McDermid, 2006), with a phenomenological approach holding that human endeavors are immanent not transcendent, and that communicative acts are experiential rather than empirical (Spiegelberg, 1965; Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006), and with a poststructuralist approach considering that human undertakings are simulacra rather than realities, and that communicative acts are political rather than neutral (Turner, 1990; Hoy, 2004).

Scholars conceiving communication as a posteriori, as constructed, have directly or indirectly attacked the views of theorists conceiving communication as a posteriori. Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1927) responded to Walter Lippmann’s (1922) notion of communication as social event, as the adaptation of “the pictures in our heads” to “the world outside,” with a concept of communication as collaborative cultural act, as the creative production/interpretation of worlds, of words and pictures. Among others, phenomenological philosophers and social theorists (Husserl, 1960; Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1968; Schultz, 1970) opposed the functionalist notion of communication as facticity, as accumulation

of raw data from the reality, and transmission of such raw data from one being to another, with a concept of communication as experience, as aggregation of realities from the concrete living of spatiality and temporality, and sharing of such lived aggregates between human beings.

Poststructuralist thinkers (Foucault, 1970; Derrida, 1976; Kristeva, 1982; Deleuze & Guattari, 1984) counteracted the elitism and conformism of functionalism-empiricism, the beliefs in the necessity of communication products and processes to maintain status quo and to preserve existing order, with a praise of marginalities and of liminal experiences, of communicative attempts to disrupt status quo and change existing order.

Recent trends in communication studies, especially cultural and critical studies, have been based on and associated with the conception of communication as a posteriori. For example, starting from Dewey's philosophy, James Carey (1989) proposed the shift from "a transmission view of communication," centered on the idea of transferring signals and messages over distance for the purpose of control (p.15), to "a ritual view of communication," linked to archaic understandings of communication as "participation," "association," "fellowship," and centered "not on the act of imparting information, but the representation of shared beliefs" (p.18). Or, starting from hermeneutical, phenomenological, neo-Marxist or poststructuralist premises, cultural and critical theorists have proposed a shift from communication, the given or the "received," to communicability, the potential or the virtual (Stephenson, 1980; Chang, 2006); a shift from communication, the noun, conveying stasis and fixity, to communicating, the verb, conveying dynamics and openness (Pilotta & Mickunas, 1990; Seibold & Myers, 2006); a shift from communication, the objectual or the exterior, to communicative action (Habermas, 1984) or communicative praxis (Craig, 1989), on the point of convergence between the objectual and the subjective, the exterior and the interior, the received and the shared; a shift from communication as dominant-culture building, as concentration on one place and time and depiction of such a

spatio-temporality as the only possible, to communication as third-culture building, as opening towards other places and times, towards multiplicity and diversity (Shuter, 1993).

With what follows, we take up further explication of a priori approaches to communication by examining positions that use a “communication as product” view of communication as information, as behavior and as medium. Then we examine the “communication as process” view of communication as transmission, as stimulus-response and as cause and effect.

#### **4. A Priori Communication**

##### **a. Communication as Product**

The definition of communication as product, the conceptualization of communication by isolating and examining the visible, audible, or palpable output of a communicative act, has played a major role in the constitution of the communication discipline. In the 1950s, A.J. Ayer (1955) asserted that “We use the word ‘communication’ sometimes to refer to what is so transferred, sometimes to the means by which it is transferred, sometimes to the whole process” (p.13). Ayer affirmed that communication is commonly understood as the “what” product, the object of transferal, as the “how” product, the means of transferal, or as a process, thus placing together two versions of the a priori position on communication as product with the a priori position on communication as process.

Currently, the process view of communication is preeminent in explicitly defining communication (Beniger, 1993, p.21; Miller, 2005, pp.5-11), yet paradoxically the product view of communication is predominant in implicitly characterizing communication (Hall, 1989, p.42; Peters, 1999, 28-31). The majority of communication handbooks are organized around segregated theories of the message, theories of the senders and receivers of messages, whether

individuals, small and large groups, organizations, or theories of the media (Littlejohn & Foss, 2004; West & Turner, 2004); the majority of communication organizations, collections or journals are also organized around such groups. Many communication handbooks are dedicated exclusively to formation and theories of the message (Berger, 1989; Ellis, 1999), characteristics and theories of the communicators (Knapp & Miller, 1994; Stohl, 1995), or development and theories of media (Vivian, 1995; Baran & Davis, 2006), and also many communication organizations, collections or journals are dedicated to one such isolated element.

*i. Communication as Information*

The definition of communication as information is its consideration as a fixed and stable message, as an item produced by a (not necessarily human) entity, and reproduced by another (human or nonhuman) entity. For example, Shannon and Weaver (1949) wrote that “The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point,” that the main concern of communication is that of engineering this reproduction (p.3). Although communication theorists (Cappella, 1977; McQuail & Windahl, 1981) have generally considered that Shannon and Weaver (1949) treat communication as process, because they conceptualize an information transmission model, we consider that Shannon and Weaver treat communication as product, because they are preoccupied by the successful duplication of the message, reified as information, rather than by the depiction of relationships involving sources and receivers.

In this view, communication-information is entirely objectified and neutralized, because it is the same for anybody in any place or time, and because it is entirely translatable. As Berlo (1975) stated enthusiastically, “the explosion of information joins the explosion of population as the two significant revolutions of our times,’ making it both impossible and unnecessary for humans to stock information within, and possible and necessary for humans to store information

without. As Leonard Hawes (1983) stated critically, communication-information has been conceived as the currency of modern and contemporary economics and politics, and “information theory and technology, as discursive practices, are inscribed quite densely into the natural and social sciences” (p.132). Promoters of communication as information have praised this view for its potential to provide a translatable model of knowledge (Krippendorff, 1975), whereas the critics of communication as information have condemned this view for its reduction of knowledge to objectivity and commodity (Darling-Wolf, 2004) and of translation to transparency (Striphas, 2006).

*ii. Communication as Behavior*

The definition of communication as behavior is its consideration as an intentional and rational message, a demeanor produced by a human entity and read or consumed by another. According to Daniel Katz (1981), behavior is formed of attitudes, predispositions “of the individual to evaluate some symbol or object of his world in a favorable or unfavorable manner,” as well as of opinions, verbal or nonverbal expressions of attitudes (p.41). Whereas communication as information is the imparting of that which is certain, generalizable and externalizable, communication as behavior is the imparting of that which is uncertain, disputable and internalizable (Hovland et al, 1953, pp.6-10). Whereas communication as information is the production/reproduction of messages in entities that can be humans, animals and even machines, communication as behavior is the production/consumption of opinions in entities that can only be human (Allport, 1967, pp.3-7).

In this view, communication-behavior is observable and ultimately understandable, because human beings are rational and predictable entities, and because attitudes and opinions are shaped and conveyed in the same manner for anybody in any place or time, although with particular inflections to be delineated by the astute observer (the researcher-scientist). As



Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) affirmed enthusiastically, all behavior has communicative potential, is discernable and explainable, and therefore it is impossible to not communicate (p.48-51). As Motley (1990) affirmed critically, although “equating behavior and communication” has been explicit or implicit in many theoretical positions, the presuppositions that communication-behavior is “the attribution (by a ‘receiver’) of meaning to behavior” and that “there is no behavior or behavioral state to which meaning cannot be attributed by another person” (pp.1-2) are disputable and should be questioned. Proponents of communication as behavior have praised this view for its potential to provide a generalizable model of human understanding (Blass, 1977), whereas the critics of communication as behavior have condemned this view for its reduction of human understanding to observability and predictability (Cappella & Folger, 1980) and of human being to rationality (Cronen, 1998).

### *iii. Communication as Medium*

The definition of communication as medium is its consideration as a technical device, as an environment in which information is produced and reproduced, in which behavior is produced and consumed. For many people outside of the academia or in other academic disciplines, communication means communications, or telecommunications. For many people in communication studies, communication means journalism and broadcasting, or the media. Schramm and Porter (1982) reported that “When the critic and philosopher Kenneth Burke sent a book to press in 1935, he proposed the title *Treatise on Communication*. The publisher vetoed the name because, so he said, readers would expect a book on telephone wires” (p.2). We consider that, although social, political and cultural contexts have changed, and many people have been compelled to consider a variety of communication situations, and although educational contexts have changed, and many publishing houses have been pressed to promote diverse communication materials, the conception of communication as medium is still alive and

strong, and it permeates numerous other conceptions. As Mary Mander (1983) affirms, “At the heart of communication, however defined, is the fact that it is mediated” (p.12).

Communication defined as medium has as characteristics replicability and simulation, because the environment essentialized as communication itself fabricates and propagates not only its own information and opinion (McLuhan, 1964; Bourdieu, 1972), but also its actors and audiences, and its spaces and times (Ellis, 1982; Kuhn, 1985). Communication defined as medium also has as characteristics determinism and commercialization, because the environment essentialized as communication itself is dependent upon the evolution and refinement of technological devices, and has forwarded new financial, political and cultural elites (Murdock, 1996; Herman & McChesney, 1997). Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) asserted that the mass media shape reality by enhancing the policies or groups they cover and by reaffirming the mainstream moral norms they support, but especially by narcotizing large masses of the population through the supply of vast quantities of media products. As Dayan and Katz (1992) stated, television builds its own realities, because artificial media-produced events are naturalized through media consumption, and because “reality is uprooted by media events”, as “television causes events to move off the ground and ‘into the air’” (p.9). As Gitlin (1978) critically appraised, this understanding of communication is connected with the inclinations of media organizations “to define normal and abnormal social and political activity,” and to ignore corporate ownership and control; or, as Tunstall (1981) critically assessed, this conceptualization of communication is linked with the imperialist tendencies of media organizations, that try to produce ready-made experiences, ready-made ideas, for publics to reproduce and adopt.

#### b. Communication as Process

The definition of communication as process, the conceptualization of communication by formulating and exploring schematic models of communicative acts, has been the

overwhelmingly dominant trend in the field of communication. Out of the 126 definitions of communication outlined by Dance and Larson (1976), 44 mention the word “process,” and numerous others discuss flow, transfer, transmission or transaction. Nowadays, numerous authors of different orientations acknowledge that communication does not entail a single definition or conceptualization, yet ground their approaches to communication in a processual definition and conceptualization. For example, Heath & Bryant (2000) assert that “Hundreds of definitions have been proposed over the past 50 years, but none is entirely satisfactory” (p. 46), yet they present an “anatomy” of the “communication process,” thus clearly indicating the communication definition they prefer. Littlejohn (2002) states that “Communication is difficult to define,” yet he characterizes communication by means of three elements outlined by Frank Dance (1970), level of observation, intentionality and judgment, that lead to a definition of communication as process (p.6). Julia T. Wood (2004) affirms that communication does not mean the same thing to everyone and does not have the same value for everyone, yet she employs a definition of communication as “a systemic process in which individuals interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings” (p.9).

Whereas communication as product isolates and essentializes a single element of a communicative act, a message, a communicator or group of communicators, or a channel, communication as process simplifies and essentializes the whole communicative act, a linear and schematized progression of a message from a sender, through a channel, to a receiver. The attempts to move the processual consideration of communication from a “causal deterministic” frame to a flux approach, from a view of the process as sender-receiver transmission, a stimulus response relation, or a cause-effect chain, to a view of the process as processing, activity or relationality (Berlo, 1977; Cappella, 1977) have failed. This type of consideration has predominantly remained confined to linearity and to sequentiality (Smith, 1972), to the oblivion

of concrete, particular spatial and temporal relations (Hardt, 1992: 77-122), as well as confined to conformity, to ignoring specific power relations (Jansen, 2002: 43-71).

*i. Communication as Transmission*

The definition of communication as transmission is its consideration as a connection between two distinctly individuated communicative entities, or communication subjects, and one distinguishable symbolic entity, or communication object, in a distinct symbolic environment, or communication channel. Clevenger (1959) viewed communication as “any dynamic, information sharing process” (p.5). Berelson and Steiner (1964) defined communication as “the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, etc. by the use of symbols – words, pictures, figures, graphs, etc.” (p.527). Campbell (1971) stated that “though communication and language acts are often called ‘symbolic,’ no distinction can be made between ‘symbolic’ and ‘real’ acts” (p.7). DeVito (1986) wrote that communication is “the process or act of transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver, through a channel and with the inference of noise; the actual message or messages sent or received; the study of the processes involved in the sending and receiving of messages” (p.61).

In this view, a first communicative entity transfers one finite symbolic entity to a second communicative entity; then, the second communicative entity appropriates the received communication object, and transfers another finite symbolic entity to the first communicative entity in response. According to Rogers and Kinkaid (1981), in a transmission logic communicative entities engage in communication-exchange, or people interact, because they must coordinate their symbolic objects, their meanings, in order to live together in a predictable physical world and social order. According to Pearce and Cronen (1980), in a transmission logic symbolic entities, exchange objects, words and meanings, are considered transparent and transferable information. According to Carey (1989), in a transmission logic a medium is “an

instrument for disseminating news and knowledge [...] in larger and larger packages over greater distances. Promoters of communication-transmission have praised this view for its potential to explain how information can be carried from one entity to another (Westley & MacLean, 1957), how innovation can be displaced and replaced, exported and imported (Rogers, 1983), whereas critics of communication-transmission have condemned this view for reducing intersubjectivity to a mechanical transfer of symbolic items, for limiting collaboration to offering for possession and taking in possession such items (Carey, 1989; Mosco, 1996).

*ii. Communication as Stimulus-Response*

The definition of communication as stimulus-response is its consideration as the dependence of the discernable reactions, opinions or attitudes, of one communicative entity, communicative subject or group, on its biological or symbolical medium or environment, as well as a dependence of the discernable reactions of one communicative entity on the actions of another communicative entity in a physical-symbolical medium or environment. According to Cherry (1966), communication is “that which links an organism together,” that which ensures an organism’s adaptation to its physical and symbolical habitat (p.36). According to Munn (1962), communication “occurs whenever the behavior of one organism acts as a stimulus for the behavior of another” (p.430). In the first view, communication occurs as a reactive attitude to a stimulating milieu, to an environment that becomes communicative entity; in the second view, communication occurs as a reactive attitude to a stimulating behavior within a milieu. According to Motley (1990),

Symptomatic behaviors (e.g. stomach growls, observable automatic responses, scratching, etc.), at least in their pure form, exemplify behaviors whose source is something other than an effort to influence a receiver. Verbal behaviors, on the other hand, are typically intended for receiver, as are analogic behaviors; i.e. intentional imitations of symptomatic behaviors [...] (p.14-15)

If communication is understood as “the eliciting of a response,” and if human communication is interpreted as “the eliciting of a response through verbal symbols” (Dance,

1967: 289), then communication can be assimilated with influence, and human communication is synonymous with persuasion (Hovland et al, 1953; Berlo: 1960:12). According to Heath (1976), from a stimulus-response position human beings are selective communicative entities, which retain a reduced number of stimuli from the wide array of exposures, which provide a small number of responses to a huge amount of stimulations. According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986), from a stimulus-response position physical and symbolical reactions are symptoms of acceptance or of resistance to specific stimuli, are signs of positive or of negative attitudes to particular provocations. Whereas in a transmission perspective the medium is technical or technological, in a stimulus-response perspective the environment is physical or biological, paradoxically becoming both a milieu of communication and a participant in communication. Promoters of communication as stimulus-response have praised this view for its potential to explain how attitude change and social learning occur (Bandura, 1977), yet critics of communication as stimulus-response have condemned this view for objectifying experience and for reducing learning to adaptation (Hirschmann, 1997).

### *iii. Communication as Cause-Effect*

The definition of communication as cause-effect is its consideration as the determination of the discernible reactions, beliefs and practices, of one communicative entity, communicative subject or group, by its social and symbolical environment, as well as the determination of the discernible reactions of one communicative entity by the discernible actions of another communicative entity in a social-symbolical medium or environment. The cause-effect conceptualization of communication resembles the stimulus-response one because they both have as foundations the idea of action-reaction chain, as well as the notion of influence. However, the stimulus-response view is related to the biological inclinations of animals or of humans, as well as to the behavioral responses of humans to their environments or to one

another, whereas the cause-effect view is connected with the social tendencies of humans, as well as with the cognitive responses of humans to technical-symbolic mediums and to individual or group pressures.

By providing a framework for propaganda analysis (1927), and by posing the question “who says what to whom through what channel with what purpose and effect?” (1948), Harold Lasswell initiated the research into the effects of the mass media on the people. Lasswell proposed a strong effects model of mediated communication, later labeled the “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle” effect, assuming that media have instantaneous effect on audiences, that they inject beliefs and practices into audiences; in this view, audiences are passive and obedient, and mishandlings of the media can produce disastrous events. Klapper (1960) challenged this view by proposing a limited effects model of mediated communication, affirming that media have a delayed rather than instantaneous effect on audiences, that they affect some people some of the time; in this view, audiences are shaped not only by the media but also by formal or informal group leaders, by norms and traditions, therefore there should be no fear of disastrous events. Lippmann presumes that individuals live in psychological and social isolation, that impersonality prevails in individuals’ interactions (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1982: 159); on the contrary, Klapper presumes that individuals live in communions and communities, and that their interactions are personalized. The conceptualization of communication as cause-effect, especially in its Klapperian version, has been praised for its potential to identify and analyze the various immediate and mediated influences to which humans are exposed (Zhu & Blood, 1997), yet has been critiqued for its commodification of audiences and relationships (Smythe, 1981).

## **Conclusion**

Discussing the numerous definitions of communication, as well as the diverse interpretations of such definitions, Raymond Williams (1967) wrote:

What do we mean by communication? The oldest meaning of the word, in English, can be summarized as the passing of ideas, information and attitudes from person to person. But, later, came also to mean a line or channel from place to place. Since the Industrial Revolution there has been so much improvement in this kind of communication – in canals, railways, steamships, cars, aircraft – that often, when we say communications, we mean these ways of traveling and carrying. Yet there is another major line of modern improvement and invention. Steam printing, the electric telegraph, photography, wireless, film, television are, like the computer with which, in a very new way, the print of this book was composed, new ways of passing ideas, information, and attitudes from person to person [...] (p.17).

Like Ricoeur's (1971) evocation of the plurivocity of all texts with which we began, we propose a classification of such definitions and conceptualizations of communication by accounting for multiple interpretations of communication as well as multiple interpretations of definitions of communication. We reconsider dominant positions by compiling and commenting upon a wide array of central and marginal positions about them, rather than reifying dominant positions by simply restating and rediscussing them. We propose a categorization of definitions of communication that is open rather than closed, that presents existing views but leaves place for other possibilities, the ones unaccounted for and the ones not yet conceived. We provide a broad systematization of the diverse understandings of communication, proposing a "widening metatheoretical framework.

We have contributed to the discussion a review of definitions of communication representing a priori approaches that explicitly or implicitly accept and adopt models of communication as product or as process, each with a focus on any one of the components of the model (information, behavior or medium) or on a particular aspect of relations among the components (transmission, stimulus-response or cause and effect). A posteriori approaches challenge and diverge from these, calling our attention to culture and politics, ritual and praxis.



As these interpretations are gathered and examined, we are mindful of Ricoeur; it has been tempting for scholars to close off interpretations with a final verdict, to declare the last word. Our work hopes to unsettle both the question and the answers to “What is communication?”

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