



# **Mediated Communication Theory**

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My own view is that we have been wrong in taking communication as secondary. Many people seem to assume as a matter of course that there is, first, reality, and then, second, communication about it. . . . What we call society is not only a network of political and economic arrangements, but also a process of learning and communication (Williams, 1976, p. 11).

### **Introduction**

"Of all things," John Dewey once wrote, "communication is the most wonderful." Perhaps this helps explain another comment, made years later by Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan suggested that the reason that communication was difficult to study was because it is to human beings what water is to a fish--the very environment. How, then, do we go about understanding the wonder of the environment that we inhabit, particularly in an age when the means of communication have become so complex, so ubiquitous, and so numerous. Where, indeed, do we begin? That, of course, is the problem of theory.

There is no single theory of communication that encompasses all human dialogue, information transfer, or media activity. There are, in fact, multiple theories that attempt to explain different aspects of the complex interactions which comprise communication. Some people argue, too, that what occurs through the medium of the press, or television, is not actually communication, since communication is an interactive (or transactive) process, and the information transferred via mechanical or electronic media flows in only one direction, with little opportunity for "audiences" to

respond or provide meaningful "feedback" as part of the activity initiated by journalists, advertising copywriters, television scriptwriters, radio disc jockeys, and so forth.

Even deciding what to call communication occurring via mechanical or electronic devices (e.g., radio, television, computers) is a problem. "Mass communication" elicits images of "mass society," a passive, easily manipulated audience that many communication scholars reject. For others, the term "mass media" is too technology-oriented, concentrating on the "means" of communication, rather than the "process." "Broadcast communication" and "electronic media" are both too specific, eliminating communication occurring via books, magazines, newspapers, films, even videotapes that no longer have to be broadcast over the airwaves to be viewed. "Mediated communication," too, is objectionable because of what it implies--that public speaking, for instance, uses no medium for its transfer from speaker to listener--which is technically untrue, since the air (a medium) carries the sound wave created by the speaker's voice to the eardrums of the hearers. Sometimes it must seem that we really haven't moved very far from Lasswell's famous dictum that what we are concerned with is "Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect" (Lasswell, 1948). We have yet to deal with the technical considerations in our mass media theory.

Nevertheless, we must use some convention. To that end, this chapter

will be concerned with "mass communication theory," resulting in attention to both technology and audience size. This term emphasizes communication theory that reaches large, unrelated and separated audiences, such as movies, radio and television, and newspapers. This term also implies attention to mass audiences that confront mechanically mediated forms of communication (newspapers, magazines, books, and films) and electronically mediated forms (radio, television, and audio and video tapes). The chapter will not focus on other electronic forms (the telegraph, telephone, coaxial cable, or microwave, including satellite communication).

The concern of the chapter, too, is communication theory--or explanation--and its social, political, economic, and intellectual roots. It is not a history of communication media, although clearly history itself is significant--since it is in history that the roots of communication theory are to be found.

Outlining mass communication theory is difficult because of the problem of determining which of the many "subphenomena" of communication (itself the phenomenon to be explained by theory) to include. Take the case of television. There are a number of subphenomena to explain. There are theories about how the technology works: how it transfers information from transmitter to receiver, how the camera or microphone affect the original content, how editing enhances, detracts from,

or alters the original image and sound patterns captured by the camera and microphone, and so on. Related to this is the issue of how best to employ the technological capabilities of the recording and editing system --how does one judge the "goodness" or "beauty" of the final product? All of these issues are aesthetic, engineering and ethical questions, requiring, in turn, aesthetic, information, and moral theories. How people make judgments concerning what material to tape, or where to place the final product (in time), on what sort of distribution system and appealing to what audiences are issues requiring us to employ economic theory. What impacts these products have on members of the audience, in turn, require some combination of political, sociological, and psychological theory.

It is the combination of these concerns which constitutes communication theory as applied to media, or mass communication, theory. This is what gives mass communication theory its richness, and what makes it so difficult to explain: this is its wonder (or confusion and complexity) and the dimensions of the environment it seeks to explain.

### **The Environment of Mass Communication Theory**

Theory does not develop in a vacuum, but responds to specific environments. We tend to think that the most germane environment for theory construction is its intellectual one--this book is, in fact, premised on that assumption. Obviously this is an important consideration. For mass

communication theory, however, this intellectual environment was not primary. Technological possibility was the first order environment for theory-building.

Communication technologies seemingly offered solutions to long-standing problems between peoples. Many theories developed based on the assumed opportunities offered by technology. Technology had a "messianic property" (See Carey & Quirk, 1970a, 1970b; Fortner, 1978; Schultze, 1987). As R. N. Vyvyan, the engineer in charge of constructing Marconi's first wireless stations in North America put it,

The invention and perfection of broadcasting has given to humanity a new method of conveying understanding, an opportunity of breaking down distrust between nations, of appreciating the music, the culture, the moral and intellectual development of other nations. . . . From a social and educational point of view the value of broadcasting is immeasurable. It has raised the standard of education, musical appreciation, and entertainment, to a new level, and has conveyed the words of the greatest spiritual and moral teachers of the period to the smallest and remotest cottages. May it not be hoped that with wise guidance its use will exert a great pacific influence on international relations and that it may be of some assistance in producing a helpful spirit between nations of mutual cooperation in the advancement of civilization? (Vyvyan, 1974, 217, 218)

Many people saw this messianic potential as inherent in communications technology. It would supposedly eliminate distance, involve scattered citizens in a common democratic experience, create the mass marketplace that would make the "American dream" a reality. In short, communications would be a power for good, overcoming political