

COMMUNICATION IN THE MODERN WORLD

Communication in the world today: one-way distribution or two-way sharing

by Sylvie Boiton-Malherbe

A hazy or changeable concept, communication in its modern form as a technique for sending and receiving messages does not fit into any single or standard discipline. It extends outside the areas in which attempts are made to confine it, from the range of application of the humanities to the operational zones of telecommunications empires. After the ethnologists and sociologists, the linguists and the systems experts, the cyberneticists and the psychiatrists had attributed diverse meanings to it, communication in the broad sense and in its day-to-day reality entered its operational period in the 1980s with the new technology of information and communication.

Whether understood as an interpersonal relationship or as a by-product of information supplied by the media, communication¹ covers a process comprising three components: sender, receiver and message. Whatever the importance of each of these elements in relation to the others, it is recognized that communication is first and foremost the *distribution* of data, of knowledge, from one or more senders to one or more receivers. In interpersonal relationships, the partaking of the message at a particular moment generates communication in the etymological sense of “communicare”, to have in common, which implies *sharing*.

Destined to bring about the greatest pooling of knowledge of all time, communication might be considered a universal instrument

¹ In the singular, since the plural in its original sense refers to means of communication by air, sea and land.

which appeared at a providential moment for entering the era of sharing. Since under the triple pressure of population growth, the decline in food resources and the production of all kinds of wastes, sharing is no longer an option but a necessary, will communication "*urbi et orbi*" be capable of lessening inequalities or will it become a means of exacerbating them? Will it become an instrument of peace, or a source of conflict for the have-nots of the electronic age?

PART ONE

COMMUNICATION, THE DISTRIBUTION OF KNOWLEDGE

After the calligraphy of the mediaeval scribes and the galactic expansion of Gutenberg's printing process, communication, by introducing electronics, has reinvented writing and its uses. It has introduced a new type of human being, whose visual range is extended by the camera and the camcorder and whose manual skills are multiplied by the computer. It forges a new link between individual and machine and simultaneously creates a new relationship with knowledge. Through its advantages and its dangers, communication has redefined the individual.

A. The advantages of communication

Communication moves in time but modulates it, organizes it while merging with it, governs it but reinvents it: time zones coexist with satellites, tides with cables. A new dimension, a new language have come into being, a new interconnection of the earth's elements and inhabitants. Communication potentiates and implements, stage by stage, from telegraph to satellite, the programme for imparting news. In so doing, it acts as a relay for the law, which organizes and safeguards it.

Communication is an idea, a figure, an image, music! It fascinates and so catches the attention of the individual through the senses; it captures the imagination, which it nurtures, transmutes and transcends. By enabling people to express themselves in their diversity and complexity, communication discloses identity, it undermines and alters the notion of stranger.

1. Communication in the service of the law: the free flow of information

“Economic and political developments, coupled with striking progress in transport and telecommunications, have led to a vast increase in the volume of international communication and exchange of information as well as in the international movement of persons and the circulation of educational, scientific and cultural materials. Global communications networks, expanded by the development of satellite technology, provide the possibility for instantaneous exchange of news both by word and image among all countries linked to the systems.”²

Communication has thus become a worldwide phenomenon. Agreements concluded between continents and between countries, with the connections that make it possible, now and in the future, to transmit messages by cable, satellite and, later, networks, facilitate the free flow of information day by day, its smooth functioning guaranteed not only by technical management but also by respect for the law.

The notion of “the free flow of information” is a comparatively recent one, first used about fifty years ago. During the 1930s, in fact, the propagation of information as completely and freely as possible seemed the only way to combat false news and war propaganda and so to safeguard peace. The universal propagation of information was thought sufficient to enable the nations to understand each other better and to respect each other more.³

The requirement of “accuracy of news in relative terms”, in the terminology of the time, took it for granted that a multiplicity of news items was the only remedy against their possible inaccuracy. This

² *Thinking ahead — UNESCO and the challenges of today and tomorrow*, UNESCO, Paris (1977), p. 333. Another example is the use of the geostationary satellite. States without their own satellites have reserved space (see World Administrative Conference on Radiocommunications, use of the orbit or geostationary satellites and the planning of space services utilizing this orbit, ORB. 1988, Geneva, 29 August-6 October 1989, also the virtually worldwide broadcasts of the European Broadcasting Union resulting from reciprocal agreements negotiated with the sound broadcasting organizations in all the countries of North and South America, in the Arab countries, in the countries of Eastern Europe and those of Asia.

³ Like the absence of news, news of a tendentious or inaccurate nature represents a threat to peace by keeping up “artificial hatred among nations by means of the printed word” (Stephan Zweig, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 6 August 1932): A panel of journalists was set up in 1931 to pass judgement on those responsible for war propaganda. It was part of the “Peace Triptych”, as the League of Nations (peace), the International Court of Justice (justice) and the Honorary Tribunal of Journalists (truth) were known at the time. See Boiton-Malherbe, Sylvie, *La protection des journalistes en mission périlleuse dans les zones de conflit armé*, Editions Bruylant, Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, Brussels, 1989, pp. 73-115.

criterion may therefore be considered as underlying the principle of the free flow of information, a principle that has since become a point of reference in international law. The principle is also based on the legal instruments pertaining to human rights: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1956), the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the American Convention on Human Rights (1969), and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), all of which form part of the law of peace.⁴

It is therefore in the context of the overall programme for maintaining peace, whose very purpose requires it to take the diversity of peoples and their cultures into account, that the future possibilities of communication must be evaluated.

2. Communication reveals identity: the expression of cultural diversity

Just as the identification of an individual constitutes one of the most fundamental links with the group, so the identification of a culture as being different from others represents the reality and the proof of its existence. Communication plays a basic role in shaping the expression of identity, in handing on traditions to members of one culture, and in conveying identifiable images to those of other cultures. The identity of a society, of a culture or of an institution in fact constitutes a "leaven for the future" and the finest of incentives. For it is in remaining faithful to their own values and principles that societies and institutions are able to grow in perfect harmony, to develop and to keep genuine dialogue alive among themselves.

In this context, advanced methods of communication — in particular, audiovisual methods — are more than ever capable of reaffirming the cultural identity of various countries; but to do this, access to the media and the methods used must not be barred by insurmountable financial and technical obstacles.

Helping to overcome such obstacles is, of course, the task of international organizations in general and in particular of UNESCO, whose Constitution notes that the States party to it have decided to develop

⁴ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 19; *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, Articles 19 and 20; *European Convention on Human Rights*, Article 10; *American Convention on Human Rights*, Articles 13 and 14; *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, Article 9.

and multiply relations between their peoples in order to reach better understanding and acquire more detailed and reliable knowledge of their respective customs.⁵

It cannot be too often stated that education and training using the various forms of communication are indispensable for access to respect for cultural identity and to safeguard values. Thus communication is seen as a decisive factor in the battle against illiteracy, the promotion of continuous training and rural education, the teaching of practical and professional skills, cultural development and its dissemination beyond the country's borders, also the improvement of institutional facilities and of planning.⁶

But is there enough stress on the fact that literacy programmes, together with cultural development, environmental protection and instruction in practical skills, require constant adjustment and updating? Research into the humanities and the social sciences (anthropology, geography, history, sociology, demography, etc.), like strictly scientific and technical resources, becomes immediately accessible through communication. Hence communication is seen to be both *a means of revealing cultural identity* and *a device for spreading existing knowledge*.

It may thus be said that communication shapes knowledge through its techniques and introduces new techniques for imparting knowledge.

⁵ In this context, the most recent UNESCO programme of October 1989 (*Communication in the service of humanity*) has the merit of pointing out that "the new world order of information and communication" had as its purpose to make a major contribution to the freedom of expression and communication, based on consensus. Moreover, the programme provides for enhancement of the International Programme for Dissemination and Communication (IPDC), created in 1980 on the initiative of the western nations, also more aid from the latter for improving means of communication in developing countries and adapting them to local conditions.

⁶ Experiments in "total development" will be recalled (these involved taking into account all systems of communication in planning education). At the UNESCO regional conferences in San José, Costa Rica (1976), in Kuala Lumpur (1979) and in Yaoundé (1980), discussions on national policies were part of the debate on self-reliance, a concept inseparable from the demand for diversity and cultural identity. This concept has been enfeebled by the very people who talk about it, since the famous "national communication councils", made up of various components of civil society, have received no encouragement from the States since the conferences. "This state of affairs, in many cases, showed that far from being the adversary of the private sector, the State, already divested of its power of arbitration, had joined the ruling classes, that small proportion of society bound up with transnational capital, in growing reluctance to consider the demands of society as a whole with regard to communication". Cf. Mattelart, A.; Delcourt, Y.; Mattelart, M., *La culture contre la démocratie*, La Découverte, Paris, 1984, p. 120.

Knowledge is both its purpose and its means, its cause and its effect. But it also involves dangers, and not only those of computerization.⁷

B. The dangers of communication

A number of recent surveys have shown that despite (or because of) the tremendous technical possibilities in relation to data handling and the genuine efforts at co-operation in the world, the flow of information shows a serious disparity between the transmitting sources. Information continues to emanate chiefly from a small number of technically advanced and highly industrialized countries towards the rest of the world and, to a great extent, the flow of data, and the supply of equipment and technical materials form part of international commercial transactions which, while they guarantee essential services and the transfer of technical know-how and experience, pose problems of cultural identity and of technological dependence.

The sheer size of the audience reached by mass communications media, especially radio and television, and the ease and rapidity with which information and ideas are able to spread throughout the world regardless of frontiers, arouse growing concern about the content and quality of what is published and broadcast, and about the influence of mass communications on individual citizens, on communities and on relationships among nations.

For all these reasons, some authors imagine the human being of the future as a nomadic "Walkman", because of the ease of transporting the technical means of communication, typified by the pocket radio/tape player with earphones; others, in contrast, see the future human being as totally immobile and passive in front of a huge television screen. Without being unduly alarmist about the potential dangers of communication, it is desirable to mention some of the harmful effects on individuals, in their private lives and as consumers, without prejudging the consequences that might ensue unless compensatory processes arise to regulate them automatically. Naturally, acceptable criteria must be established as to the rights, duties and responsibilities of professional communicators, both institutions and individuals.

⁷ The term computerization being understood, like the earlier term industrialization, to cover all economic, social and legal modifications that arise when technical changes take place.

1. The dangers for citizens as private persons

The development of communications technology in the administrative, military and medical spheres is capable of eroding public freedoms and individual liberty in all their forms: freedom of expression and association, freedom of movement, to be considered essential alongside the right to privacy.

Vigilance is necessary, not only to safeguard these rights and freedoms but also to strengthen legal machinery and legislation on the subject. Here two basic principles collide: the right to respect for personal privacy and the right to ever-growing information. The latter is considered not only as the right to be informed but also as the right to have direct access to a body of public and private data, something made feasible by technology and by general access to computer files.

The use of electronics and computers in communications in fact increases the potential for controlling individuals, to such an extent that the threats to personal freedoms foreseen by George Orwell in his novel *1984* might well come to pass, since the parallel uses that might be made of the data concerned are unknown. The files of a data bank, for example, could be used to pirate products or processes, or for abusive and/or illegal operations; or they could quite simply be subject to erroneous handling.

2. The dangers for citizens as consumers

Consumers are more or less knowingly victims of the publicity machine and all other types of “doctored” information aimed at them. In audiovisual communication, for example, the skill in “montage” makes it more and more difficult for the consumer to distinguish between the basic message and its presentation, these being further modified by the place they occupy within a whole group of messages. For instance, the camera is an extension of the eye, thus the choice of the object or scene filmed is bound to have an effect on the spectator. And observation through television is increasingly replacing direct observation.

This is one aspect of the more general problem of representing reality, which is reduced in size — and therefore nearer — while being presented in various and special dimensions (order of importance of subjects, choice and duration of sequences). In other words, information without the slightest claim to impartiality can be presented as the truth: instead of “It’s true, I read it in the paper”, people say “It’s

true, I saw it on television". The difference is a significant one, since it enables the viewer to think, because of the images seen, that he has actually witnessed the event; yet the images show only a part of the reality. This communication makes eye-witnesses, as it were, of virtually everyone; and an eye-witness becomes involved much more easily than a reader or even a listener. This accounts for the trend towards "vote-catching ploys", the spread of sensationalism in all spheres, and disinformation.⁸ Other adverse effects are proliferating opinion polls (the loser audience of show politics),⁹ the abuse of multiple-choice questionnaires, etc.

It may be argued that the axiom of interpersonal communication ("It is not possible not to communicate")¹⁰ is currently extending beyond communication between individuals and occupying all social structures under the influence of technological means. Because of their impact on different audiences (taxpayers, voters, consumers, etc.), these means lead irrevocably to the excessive use of communication as a way of "selling" a personal image, the prerequisite for social success.

Technological progress appears to enable everyone to benefit from information, but this is received in very unequal measure: there is either too much or not enough, especially worldwide. The overabundance of data has adverse effects (information taken out of context; fashionable topics; the failure to interpret or reflect on the event reported; etc.). The absence or relative lack of information is the cause of people or countries becoming marginalized or isolated. This uneven flow of apparently generalized information would suggest that its distribution considered solely for profit can lead to inequality and even injustice.

A new understanding of communication in the broad sense and in the concrete meaning of dialogue and sharing might be capable of minimizing the worst aspects of the consequences that lie ahead.

⁸ One of the adverse effects of the process is that it eliminates the time vital to the basic work of a journalist, that was formerly available to verify information. A recent example is the reporting of a mass grave discovered in Timisoara; checking later showed that it was not what it was made out to be.

⁹ "The daily bludgeoning (in the strict meaning of the word) of public opinion by the media through opinion polls is a perfect example of the way in which the profession of purveyor of information has deteriorated", *La communication, victime des marchands*, La Découverte, Paris, 1989, p. 63.

¹⁰ Raised to a principle by the researchers of the Palo Alto school. Cf. Bateson, G., Birdwhistell, R. and Goffman, E., *La nouvelle communication*, Seuil, Paris, 1984, pp. 27-61.

PART TWO

A TIME FOR SHARING

The danger that technological progress will further widen the existing gap between developed and developing countries implies that the time has come to halt the widespread wastage of energy sources, whether investments or human potential, teaching facilities, cash or know-how.

The prospect of losing acquired advantages or of bad management of potential resources should be a reason for vigilance, now and in the future.

There should be immediate acceptance of new reflexes, such as the systematic use of joint consultation, so that a mental rapprochement can gradually be brought about.

However, in the medium and long term a genuine change in mental attitudes through education and training must be envisaged.

A. Basic current concern: joint consultation

The aid that has to be given to the least privileged countries can be beneficial in the long term only if it takes into account the advantages that already exist; it is on to these, as on to the parent stem of a plant, that the buds of future growth must be grafted.

This operation means abandoning the associated ideas of *benefactor and beneficiary*, a relic of the feudal world of protector and protected, widespread everywhere and still deep-rooted in conduct and reflexes. The attitude of its protagonists has facilitated and then condoned a system of aid conceived by one side only. However, since it is a two-way process it requires both sides to be jointly responsible not only for formulating the messages but also for wishing to achieve a genuine exchange of ideas.

1. Desire for authenticity

The current slide towards increasingly “visible” materialism, translated by modern communications into a kind of worldwide pattern of consumer society, might well foster dangerous combinations. The manicheism that seeps into all comparative thought will probably continue to exist in mental reflexes, according to which developed and/or industrialized = good, whereas undeveloped and/or non-industrialized = inadequate.

The imperfect aspect of such prefabricated ideas needs no demonstration, but the remedies seem few, at a time when the sheer quantity of information also brings about personal rejection based on opinions and reactions generated at the speed of a television commercial.

Nevertheless, it may be hoped that relationships will become truer and deeper if the exchange of ideas is placed on a new footing.

In such an exchange, understanding is relative to the way in which the message is heard, i.e., intercepted, quite as much as to the way in which it is addressed to the hearer. The exchange in communication, indeed, comprises not only what is said but also, partly, what is not said but is perceived through the attitude accompanying it, which sometimes conveys more information than the actual words.

The authenticity desired by the person requesting aid is therefore the closest possible description of that person's *real* needs at a specific moment, however difficult it may be to attain. Indeed, there is much *food for thought* in some of the failures due to lack of communication when aid has been given, in particular the idea that the aid was not really wanted, since it was decided unilaterally. Just as an authoritative attitude, whether explicit or implicit, should be eschewed by those providing aid, so a passive attitude by those receiving it is the proof that true communication — that is, the exchange and sharing of ideas — has not been established. The perception of messages, whatever their nature, by those for whom they are intended, through reading, the mass media, communication in general, is in reality a *reconstruction* based on a variety of mental and emotional materials inherent in the recipients. It is not a kind of overlay but a unique assimilation that “identifies” the new data by comparing them with former ones. This reconstruction is a genuine process.

During an exchange, it is essential to allow time for listening to the other party's message, in order for communication to be established or to continue. This listening process is momentary self-forgetfulness.

2. Listening: a step towards authentic communication

Listening therefore means not merely hearing without understanding, not imposing one's ideas without knowing the other party's wishes, not teaching or administering without discovering the visible or hidden deficiencies or needs; it may also involve staying in the background and remaining discreet and respectful.

While listening consists in not regarding oneself as the sole point of reference and in accepting the criteria of others, it is also expressed

in research. An attitude rather than a principle, listening is shown in the intellectual sphere by tolerance, which assumes that open-mindedness to the views of others is a precondition for communication. It is an attitude, but not a passive one: it is dynamic in adjusting to realities, whether familiar or unknown, an adjustment necessary for sharing knowledge and practical skills. It is a two-way process, each party coming halfway to meet the other. This approach is symbolic both of interdependence and of "otherness".

If this approach is applied to "communication as sharing", the means of working out a new pattern of aid to be dispensed in the future, two additional effects may be hoped for.

One is the reforming of the code under which aid is currently dispensed, i.e. in accordance with data gathered locally as elements of reflection and construction. The other effect is to make it vital for those receiving aid to reformulate the request in the general context of their culture in the widest sense, including their philosophy. All these requirements would result from the concern for authenticity on each side.

B. Indispensable for the future: investment in education and training

It is needless to emphasize that understanding between individuals or peoples is fostered by mutual knowledge. The course of action described above aims to achieve mutual acceptance by teaching methods that will develop a perception of "otherness" as being an element of diversity and richness. Education and training, therefore, thanks to the varied methods offered by the new ways of communication, could help to arouse, especially among young people, the realization of their difference in relation to the numerous models that exist in the world and also as compared with the stereotypes imposed on them today. The awareness of belonging to a culture and that of its complementarity with other cultures should be built up together, based on better knowledge of the characteristics of each.

1. Knowledge suitable to different cultures

The adjustment of theoretical and practical teaching to local conditions may benefit from the new methods of communication, particularly audiovisual aids.

Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that care will be taken to avoid

exporting, along with the new techniques, adverse or uncontrolled effects that have already been analysed and found regrettable.

The imprinting of messages and knowledge in the minds of those receiving information builds up their intellectual and psychological capital, since, as has been pointed out, the perception of new elements of knowledge gives rise on each occasion to the recreation or recombination of the knowledge previously acquired by each person.

It is well known that in certain highly structured traditional societies, educators have reservations about knowledge and skills from the outside. If errors of interpretation, misunderstandings, possibly even distortion of the original intention or rejection by the beneficiaries are to be avoided, the message accompanying any programme for disseminating knowledge must not only be clear and intelligible to the recipients but must also strike a chord in their own culture and system of values.

It should be stressed that instruction aimed at changing mentalities should be given as early as possible in the educational syllabus, at the same time as theoretical and practical courses. Just as the absence of certain sounds in their mother tongue makes it harder for some children to learn another language containing such sounds, so the notions of equality, tolerance, altruism, etc., are unlikely to spring up accidentally or spontaneously in human beings, whose nature is egocentric, unless the basic criteria are inculcated from childhood onwards.

There is an ambiguity here in that transplanted of the above notions may well be contrary to the habits or cultural reflexes that are otherwise to be safeguarded. It would seem that only by highlighting the complementary nature of universal values and of local traditions can their parallel teaching be justified.

2. Learning to respect individual rights: changing mentalities

The attempt to accustom people to others who are different, behave differently or come from another country, a desirable approach in educational methodology, includes two other elements. First, it tends to show the great diversity of cultures and traditions, also of conduct by individuals within them. In so doing, however, it reveals the other side of the coin, which is the similarity of primordial human reactions towards life and death, God and nature, hatred and affection, war and peace. Thus, the dialogue sought in order to discover others also brings the discovery of self and of the affinity between fellow human beings.

The singling out of elements of comparison enables thought patterns to be discerned that do not always align with the usual religious divisions, as if here and there a universal system of ethics already existed.¹¹

These convergences of convictions and behaviour form the foundations of a universal conscience, of which human rights are merely the political and legal aspect. This conscience also encompasses individual rights in the broadest sense, both in their “humanitarian” and in their “environmental” connotation, now that the problems in both contexts overlap: dwindling food resources, industrial pollution causing ecological damage on a planetary scale, e.g., desertification and diminution of drinking water; the manufacture and use of nuclear, chemical and bacteriological weapons; genetics engineering; etc.

This universal conscience, unquestionably more necessary today than ever before, might be fostered by the use of ever-improving methods of communication in a spirit of sharing that is already an integral part of the joint action process, indeed induces it.

It is to be hoped that the gravity of the problems will lead more or less naturally to a return to authenticity or its modulating appearance in spheres where it is still unknown. Communication, essential to dialogue, is capable of laying the foundation of understanding among nations, soon no longer a choice but a necessity. It must, in fact, be the language spoken by tomorrow’s citizens of the world.

CONCLUSION

With its advantages, used to ensure a genuine flow of information all over the world to all individuals and all cultures, and despite the dangers it holds for citizens and consumers, will communication become the new divinity of the future? Improving machines gives greater control of knowledge, but does not increase the free choice of those using them; better tools benefit those newly versed in the use of automatic telecommunications, while excluding the “poor relations” of the electronic era.

¹¹ Jean Pictet, to demonstrate the universal character of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, stated that “humanitarian principles belong to all peoples and take root under all favourable conditions. When we bring together and compare different moral systems and dispose of the non-essentials, that is to say their special peculiarities, we find in the crucible a pure metal, the universal heritage of mankind”. Jean Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross — Commentary*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1979, p. 11.

Some people regard communication as an advance comparable with the invention of the wheel, the stirrup, the mill or the steam engine, but it may legitimately be asked whether it is not something more.

If communication, thanks to technological progress, is now becoming a better method of propagating knowledge, which is a recognized factor in personal development, it must be assumed that its improved propagation is not merely quantitative but also qualitative. This implies not only an increase in knowledge and ensuing experience, with its various economic and cultural implications, but also the achievement of personal fulfilment in terms of developing and giving expression to one's own inherent abilities. Such a process involves the spiritual dimension of the human being.

Unless the gaps are closed, it is unsure whether the sounding board of earth's communication will resonate to peace or war, profits or sharing, helping or ignoring. All should be given the chance to express their own kind of truth, i.e., their own authenticity, while listening and paying heed to the truths of others, thus creating dialogue, mutual discussion, and sharing.

And what greater expression of affinity is there than sharing?

Sylvie Boiton-Malherbe

Sylvie Boiton-Malherbe, who was born in Lyon, France, is a Doctor of Law of the State (highest level of degree in France) and holds a diploma in advanced studies of political science, also degrees in history, geography and sociology. She taught constitutional law and public international law at the Administrative Training Centre of Ouargla, in Algeria, from 1972 to 1973. She was a researcher with the Directorate for Human Rights of the Council of Europe from 1982 to 1984. At present she is Professor of International Law at the Institut d'Etudes politiques of Lyon University II, where she teaches information and communication law. She has published *La protection des journalistes en mission périlleuse dans les zones de conflit armé*, (1989).