

A Definition and Model for Communication

by Ted Slater

Introduction

Communication was taking place among the Trinity even before the Creator said, “Let there be light.” And within a week of saying that, He had made a being who, having been created in His likeness, likewise communicated. The “Community of Persons” had created a being unlike any He had previously made. And as we gain a better understanding of communication, something in which both Creator and created participate, we will likely find ourselves better able to relate with God and with others.

The Word “Communication” Defined

“Communication,” which is etymologically related to both “communion” and “community,” comes from the Latin *communicare*, which means “to make common” (Weekley, 1967, p. 338) or “to share.” DeVito (1986) expanded on this, writing that communication is “[t]he process or act of transmitting a message from a sender to a receiver, through a channel and with the interference of noise” (p. 61). Some would elaborate on this definition, saying that the message transmission is intentional and conveys meaning in order to bring about change.

A process

A *process* is an ongoing, nonstatic activity. DeVito said, “Communication is referred to as a process to emphasize that it is always changing, always in motion” (p. 239). A process, therefore, is a series of actions (purposive, some would argue), something that may be better thought of as a continuum, rather than a point. Anderson (1987), while acknowledging that the concept of process is still poorly defined in research protocols, wrote, “The notion of process involves, at least, some time dimension which means that the characteristics, causes, and consequences of some communication act are subject to change over the life of the act” (p. 49). A key element in communication, then, is this concept of “change.”

The message

A *message* is a “signal or combination of signals that serves as a stimulus for a receiver” (DeVito, 1986, p. 201). This message may be either a sign or a symbol. A sign, on one hand, is a natural, universally understood phenomenon such as

thunder (which follows the occurrence of lightning) and smoke (which suggests that a fire is also present). A symbol, on the other hand, exists by human convention. The object commonly called a stop “sign” — because it has been created by people to convey a message, and because it is not natural and universally understood — is an example of a symbol.

The channel

A *channel* is the “vehicle or medium through which signals are sent” (p. 52). This channel may convey the message visually or aurally, for example. It can be the space between two people talking, an online discussion board, or a television set, and so on.

Noise

Noise is defined to be “[a]nything that distorts the message intended by the source, anything that interferes with the receiver’s receiving the message as the source intended the message to be received” (p. 209). DeVito went on to identify three types of noise: physical noise, psychological noise, and semantic noise.

The first type of noise interferes with the physical transmission of the signal or message: he gave the examples of cars screeching, air conditioners humming, a speaker’s lisp, and sunglasses. Psychological noise, on the other hand, may include biases and prejudices, in both the sender and receiver, that lead to distortions in receiving and processing information: closed mindedness, for example. In semantic noise, according to DeVito, “the interference is due to the receiver failing to grasp the meanings intended by the sender.” He listed jargon, technical, or complex terms as being examples of semantic noise.

Most of those who study communication would identify one’s upbringing as the sole source of psychological noise. There are cases, however, when the source of interference is spiritual. The “evil one” is frequently mentioned in the Scriptures as interfering with people’s reception and understanding of the Gospel. For example, Jesus said, “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart” (Matthew 13:19, NIV). God is able to protect His chosen, however, by placing a “hedge” around them, which protects them from Satanic interference (Job 1:10). Jesus further countered this satanic noise by opening His followers’ minds so that they were able to accurately perceive and interpret the Scriptures (Luke 24:45).

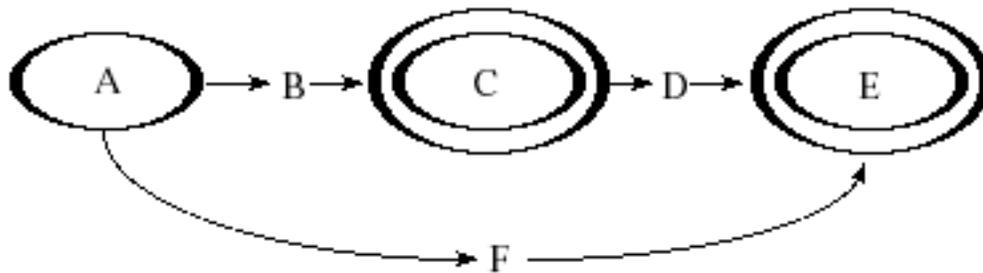
Change

According to Mambert (1971), a person communicates with another “to change

what he thinks or does not think, feels or does not feel, knows or does not know” (p. 4). He went on to say, “Communication itself is that change” (p. 4). *Change*, then, refers to the influence one has on another’s knowledge or behavior.

Scripture indicates that the purpose of communication was not solely to bring about a change in the behavior or knowledge of the one who receives the message. There were times when God, who never changes, spoke with Himself: “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26, NIV) and “The man has now become like one of us.... He must not be allowed to...” (Genesis 3:22, NIV), for example. It appears, then, that communication existed before the creation and subsequent fall of Mankind. For this definition of human communication, however, it is sufficient to say that the purpose of communication is to influence the knowledge or behavior of the receiver.

A Model of Communication



Introduction of the model

“Models,” wrote McQuail and Windahl (1989), “simplify reality, select key elements, and indicate relationships” (p. 36). They indicated that advances in the understanding of how communication works are reflected by the development of communication models.

The model of communication shown above is a simplified version of Westley’s and MacLeans’s (1989) conceptual model of mass communication (p. 38).

The event or object

The letter A represents an event or object. The ring encompassing the letter indicates that the essence of the event or object is innately imperceptible to the sender, lying deep beneath the surface appearances. Colson (1989) gave us a sense of this submerged meaning when he quoted Matthew Arnold: “Below the surface-stream, shallow and light ... there flows with noiseless current strong, obscure and deep, the central stream of what we are indeed” (p. 124). This idea, a Platonic one in that the perceivable object is merely a shadow of the Form of the object, is summed up by Saint-Exupéry (1971): “What is essential is invisible to the eye” (p. 70).

A transmission

The letter B is simply the means by which information regarding A reaches the observer. The information may be transmitted visually and/or aurally, for example.

The sender

The letter C represents the source wishing to present a particular view of event or object A. The outer ring around C represents the perceptual apparatus through which information regarding the event or object must pass. This includes the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting. As the sensed information passes through the inner ring, it is “decoded”: compared with previously received impressions and its significance interpreted. As Habermas (1984) wrote, “Every process of reaching understanding takes place against the background of a culturally ingrained preunderstanding” (p. 100).

Furthermore, because humans live in a state of fallen-ness — cognitive and emotional fallen-ness, as well as spiritual fallen-ness — the interpreted meaning of the object or event is likely not its true meaning. Jesus revealed that there are those who sense objects or events, but aren’t able to properly understand them. Speaking about those people, He said, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving” (Matthew 13:14, NIV). The Apostle Paul reiterated this when he wrote, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror.... Now I know in part...” (1 Corinthians 13:12, NIV). Even the most central event in the Christian faith is often misinterpreted — the crucifixion of Christ: “A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23, NIV).

Another transmission

The letter D represents the means by which the information in the sender reaches the audience or “destination.” Sender C must arrange the information in a form that the receiver will likely understand and transmit it in a manner which the receiver can sense. Note that the information must again pass through the two rings before it is detected by the receiver.

The receiver

The letter E represents the receiver — “any person or thing that takes in messages” (DeVito, 1986, p. 255). Just as information regarding the object or event was sensed and interpreted by the sender, so the information from the sender is sensed and interpreted by the receiver.

There may be opportunities for the receiver to gain information directly regarding the event or object, without receiving the information through the sender. The letter F, then, represents the channel through which the receiver might receive that information.

The Role of Noise in the Model

The process of communication may be disrupted in several ways. The sender's senses may inaccurately perceive the object or event: by permanent or temporary damage to the sensory organs; by psychological or emotional damage to the decoding mechanism; or by spiritual forces which interfere with the sender's perception and interpretation of A. Finally, the sender may inaccurately transmit information regarding A: by damage to the encoding mechanism; by damage to the sending device (e.g., mouth, pencil, hand); or by spiritual forces which interfere with his or her transmission of information regarding the object or event.

This model, this bit of reality made visual, may be useful in our understanding of what it means to communicate. While all the elements of communication are likely not included in this presentation, it does provide insight into this intriguing process.

Conclusion

A good understanding of communication, a dynamic process in which organisms strive to convey meaning to one another (and to oneself, one can argue), is fundamental in gaining understanding of events, objects, and other people. The definition and model presented here lay a sound foundation which may facilitate understanding of the process of communication.

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