

Communications Overload:

On Communication's Range of Influence and its Significance in the Development of Society.

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Communication is so fundamental to human existence we often fail to realize (or simply forget) how it affects all aspects of human civilization. From passing on a message to another person, to broadcasting news via the Internet, communication builds connections between individuals and forms the basic framework of society. As modern technology continues to develop, it affects not just the way we communicate, but also the content of our message and the definition of self in our minds. The text, Mass Communication in Canada, breaks down the impact of communication into eight different categories, incorporating six categories from the 1980 UNESCO Report, "Many Voices, One World," known as the MacBride Report. By examining the eight dimensions in which communication affects society, we can see how it directly impacts the definition of ourselves, our daily lives, our interaction with the world, and the development of society.

Lorimer and Gasher provide a rather comprehensive list describing the range communication has in influencing society, whether that society is oral, literate or electronic. They begin by incorporating the analysis of the MacBride Report, stating that communication "provides an information base around which a society, community or group can coalesce and interact" (Lorimer and Gasher 6-7). Simply put, we need communication in order to interact and build any kind of relationship with others. In addition, the size of one's community depends on

its ability to communicate. The farther one is able to communicate, the greater the potential to include other people within the same sphere of community, sharing common history, beliefs, interests and even desires. The Canadian experience illustrates this, as communication remains an important means of building a nation that is spread across a huge geographic space. Without the ability to communicate our “Canadian-ness” via Canadian newspapers, CBC Radio, or the Eaton’s catalogue of yesteryear, Canada would be a very different place (Lorimer and Gasher 7).

The second way communication is an influence is politically. Communication serves as a “political instrument” (Lorimer and Gasher 7), promoting specific opinions and views that influence public opinion on political issues. Any form of communication can have a political effect whether you speak your mind to a friend over the phone, or write a letter to the editor of a daily newspaper. Also, the media itself can have a political influence. It can write articles promoting a particular viewpoint, or report on events from a specific political perspective. For example, “*Le Devoir* is a staunch supporter of Quebec sovereignty, whereas *La Press* supports the federal Liberals” (Lorimer and Gasher 7). Such communication clearly can influence one’s political views and paint a particular picture of the political landscape of a country and even the world, thus influencing one’s political choices.

Communication is also an influence economically. While modern communication depends heavily on economic profitability, the reverse is also true; the economy needs communication in order to realize economic gains. As the MacBride Report states, “A constant flow of information is vital for economic life. As well as being a great economic force with incalculable potentialities, it is a decisive factor in development” (23). Without communication gathering and disseminating information, the economy would be incapable of establishing any significant balance or understanding of supply and demand. In addition to not knowing what there was to buy, we would not even know how to make something worth selling, let alone know what to sell. Our economy would simply cease to function, and would not be nearly as developed and complex as it is today. Along these same lines, without proper information, we could not make any knowledgeable financial decision, putting our financial future in jeopardy.

Education is another dimension of society where communication has a major influence. Communication enables us to distribute virtually endless amounts of information about any aspect of society, even of a specific individual. We can learn the details of a particular country, how to speak a different language, the accomplishments of any historical figure, or even the general interests of an individual with a personal web page. In addition, the increase in education also increases one’s ability to communicate, further expanding one’s state of life. As the MacBride Report notes, “Education is an essential tool for teaching men to communicate better and to draw greater benefits from the exchanges established between them.”

Communication also has a significant influence on culture. The MacBride Report argues that “the role of communication may be regarded as that of a major carrier of culture. The media of communication are cultural instruments which serve to promote or influence attitudes, to motivate, to foster, the spread of behaviour patterns and to bring about social integration” (30). Communication is the means by which a set of ideals, practices, behaviours and attitudes are disseminated throughout a community, and as with the social dimension, the range of communication impacts the spread of a community’s culture.

Communication also has a technological dimension. Not only does technology influence the ability to communicate, it implicitly distributes a certain “conceptual thought to create devices that are technologically feasible and have a market value” (Lorimer and Gasher 11). This relates to the other influences of communication, in so much as ‘the medium becomes the message.’ In addition to being a means of sharing information, technology itself becomes part of the message, or consisting of the entire message. Asking such questions as ‘What’s your ICQ number?’ or ‘Do you have MSN Messenger?’ are prime examples of how technology pervades communication. It also creates its own language that is distinct from everyday speech, or formal grammar and spelling. Abbreviations such as ‘brb’ to stand for ‘be right back,’ or ‘c u l8r’ for ‘see you later’ are additional examples of how technology influences communication.

Related to the six dimensions of communication above are the familial and individual dimensions. Communication has the ability to not only establish family relationships, but as technology advances, also gains the ability to “change the dynamic of the group” (Lorimer and Gasher 11). Various media bombard children with information, desires, and role models that can seriously put them at odds with their parents (Lorimer and Gasher 11). The fragmentation of the media audience, especially on television, can lead to misunderstandings at home, exasperating the ‘generation gap’ between parents and children. Instead of children following in their parents’ footsteps, they can easily go the opposite direction, even a destructive, or self-destructive direction because of a perceived “lack of understanding between generations” (Lorimer and Gasher 12). And related to this is the potential for communication to influence the individual’s sense of self and identity. It can “provide us with models of behaviour and help us shape our ‘selves’...[or] it actually may narrow the choices people tend to make in the roles they will adopt” (Lorimer and Gasher 12). By inundating ones’ self to a particular lifestyle or attitude ‘as seen on TV,’ one may in fact be inadvertently limiting one’s identity, enjoying the images one way of life and carelessly disregarding others.

From this basic overview of communications’ influence on society, one can easily begin to see how communication itself affects who we are as individuals, what we do on a daily basis, how we relate to the world, and thus how our actions impact society at large. First of all, the above overview suggests that communication can influence the individual both directly and

indirectly. It does so directly through media that carry messages aimed directly at individuals. For example, when I watch television or go see a movie, I am shown advertisements for certain products and services. In addition, the programs and movies themselves bombard me with subversive forms of advertising by way of product placements (as is invariably done in James Bond movies for cars, gadgets, cell phones), and in the character's actions, (characters smoking), clothing (wearing certain brand name clothing), even language (cool lingo, or profanity). While I may not explicitly choose to watch everything, the fact remains that the TV program or movie itself was tailored to my interests based on certain market research. Thus, this example shows how communication can directly influence an individual's choices through a technological means that can potentially influence one's family and culture.

Depending on the media in question, it can either promote or threaten the culture I am in, and influence the values that exist in my family. For example, if I watched the movie "Independence Day," I could easily be swayed to feel patriotic to the United States, even though I am a Canadian, or feel the exact opposite and feel disgust over the blatant self-reverence by Hollywood moviemakers. Either reaction could cause arguments at home where the family's 'loyalty' to one's country could be hotly debated, causing tension and dissent between parent and child. The father could argue on the pro-American side, stating the economic clout of the United States, while the child could argue the pro-Canadian side, stating the social safety net that exists in Canada. Whatever the case may be, the point is that communication can have a huge direct impact on the life of an individual.

Communication can also indirectly affect the individual, influencing the most basic elements of one's life. Communication can define a society's values, beliefs, over-arching interests, language and behaviour—all of which are essentially indoctrinated during an individual's youth through education, social interaction, cultural activities and economic practices. How we define our desires, needs, and interests depend largely on what we are taught and what we experience in our youth. For example, in a capitalist country such as Canada, I know that I can get what I want by purchasing it with the correct amount of money. In school we learn the facts about Canada, such as knowing the national symbol (the maple leaf), the national animal (the beaver), and are indoctrinated to feel pride about all these elements that physically represent a nation. These are all indirect ways communication affects our identity by educating us to think a certain way, believe a certain thing, and focus on certain values. By the time we become fully aware of our environment and ourselves, we already carry certain attitudes that result from our immersion into a certain communications environment, which can clearly affect how we live our daily lives.

With technological advances in communication, it is clear that communication influences the decisions and actions we make on a daily basis. In less than a decade, our average daily

media consumption has increased with the prevalence of Internet access in the home and in wireless communication devices such as cell phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs). For example, ten years ago, the main forms of media I would have had access to were newspapers, magazines, television, movies, radio and the telephone. Whenever I finished reading an article, watching a TV show, talking on the phone or listening to a radio program, I would turn it off and do something else. Now, with a cell phone and Internet access at home and at school, I have constant access to communication via email and web pages in addition to the more 'traditional' forms of media. It is not uncommon for me to constantly use some form of communication during my waking hours. If it's not the radio in the car, it's the cell phone in the elevator, or email when I wake up, or web sites after class. Clearly, communication has managed to infiltrate almost every moment of my daily life, having a profound influence on how I live. Access to communication has become such a commonplace thing that I rarely have to make a decision about using it. It has become a daily habit.

The pervasiveness of communication in the life of a 21st century individual living in a technologically advanced region can undoubtedly influence one's interaction and perception of society at large. With access to virtually instantaneous news from around the world, our more traditional distinctions of society, culture and community are influenced. We can either feel less attached to 'national distinctions' or emphasize our 'cultural distinctiveness.' We can feel united in our geographic community, or thrive in an online community where each person shares a particular interest. And even if one didn't live in a technologically advanced region of the world, that fact would also influence their perceptions of the world. Feelings of exclusion, abandonment, isolation, even hopelessness can permeate the minds of those living on a desert plain in central China or central Africa, hearing stories of riches and amazing technology in a land far, far away. Whatever the case may be, the influences of communication can bring both positive and negative effects to different societies, even different groups within a particular community. Divisions between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' of information and communications technology in the world, as well as the splintering divisions within society into narrowly defined communities influence how one perceives the world and interacts within it. This clearly has profound ramifications for human civilization, as differences in lifestyles and livelihoods between developed and under-developed regions of the world will only increase, in part because of the significant dichotomy created by the speed of advancements in communications technology and their costly implementation in the developed world.

Overall, while it is clear that human civilization needs communication to simply exist, the great impact of communication in our lives is quite profound in a very ironic way. For those of us who are inundated with communication in our lives, such a human necessity has become a terrible burden to the point that we want to rid ourselves of it. Doctors are never out of contact

because of their pagers; salespeople are never out of contact because of their cell phones; students are never out of contact because of email or the Internet. For teachers, if it's not communicating with their students in class, it's emailing them or their parents at home. For secretaries, if it's not answering telephones, mailing out documents, it's faxing an order form or answering client emails. For those of us in the technologically advanced world, we live in a tight web of interconnectivity, bombarded with all forms of communication that can potentially overwhelm us. While communication remains an important influence in the development of society, the incredible speed by which we can communicate can easily exceed our ability to process the content. Nevertheless, communication has and will continue to impact the way people interact and perceive the world.

Works Cited

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