

HUMAN COMMUNICATION

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'with the knowledge the Spirit is giving us today of the ways men learn and change and influence each other, we have no right to seem to be muddling along. If we desire His help in the fulfilling of our Lord's command to make Him known to the whole creation, we are necessarily called to study His ways among us - to research into the process of communication'
- J. Poulton.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION

Man has always found it necessary to share himself, his thoughts, his feelings, attitudes, knowledge and ideas - and to respond to others. When one person has established a commonness of perception, a meeting of meaning with at least one other, communication has taken place.

Often the mind is not the message source: often the source is collective, or several links exist between source and destination. The task of communication is completed on the message being understood. *Response* (in terms of acceptance or rejection, changed attitudes or behaviour) is another and different question. Communication requires simply that the message of the transmitter be recreated in the mind of the receiver. But we deceive ourselves if we think of the process as simple; it is both complex and dynamic, difficult to conceptualize and hold.

SOME PRIOR FACTORS

Assuming the simplest communication between two individuals, a number of factors need to be borne in mind:

(a) Neither the transmitter (T) nor the receiver (R) can be divorced from past and present social processes and all that has gone to make him the person he is. There will be difference - greater or lesser - in experience, education, language, attitudes, beliefs, presuppositions, goals. He is also part of several other groups and carries with him what is his from his role within each.

(b) Every individual is responding all the time to a multiplicity of messages coming to him through several senses at once. Units of communication take place in a total communicative complex and are affected and modified by the

other messages being received. Sight, sound, texture, movement, emotion, taste and smell - they come with an all-at-once-ness. It is diffuse and dynamic activity.

(c) In face-to-face encounter, there are messages being transmitted by both persons at the same time and being received by both. While T and R are talking, each hears the words, sees the expression, and is perhaps aware of the smell of the other.

(d) Their relationship is normally interdependent during the communication. Each has needs, expectations of the other, and adopts an attitude towards him. The approach is modified on the basis of mutual 'feed-back'.

(e) Two R's hear and understand the same T differently. A group reading the same poem comes to different interpretations. A nanny and a child molester both say 'Yes' to the question, 'Do you love children'.

MEDIA AND CODES

If it were possible to isolate one of the messages in order to consider its transmission and reception we would find that communication relies on 'codes'. Every message leaves T in some code or other depending on the 'medium' to be used: that is, it is 'encoded'. It must then be 'decoded' by R for communication to take place (excepting, perhaps, intuition, telepathy and other kinds of ESP!)

By *medium* is meant a channel of communication involving 'image', 'sound', 'texture', 'smell', 'flavour' - individually or in combination. To his speech and gestures man has added sign language, music, dance, ritual, drawing, carving, painting, writing, printing, telephone, radio, TV. In each of these he communicates by signs or codes which represent to someone who knows the code the reality intended by T. To speak is to encode. to listen with understanding is to decode. To write is to encode, to read with understanding is to decode. And so on.

The T, keen to get his message across, will be ready to encode it in whatever way will guarantee this when R decodes. To ensure appropriateness of symbols and similarity of pre-suppositions involves T in a real attempt to immerse himself in R's cultural condition. If the codes are not meaningful to R

the message doesn't get through. What occurs is contact not communication. Form must change wherever necessary so that the content stays the same; 'formal static equivalence' gives way to guarantee 'functional dynamic equivalence'.

But the difficulties are considerable. The images in the mind of T or R are seldom more than roughly approximate. Every R adapts, alters, and suppresses messages according to his own situation.

In the message as he decodes it, whatever has impact on R and stands out because of its individuality, distinctiveness, unexpectedness, is known as 'information'.

Communication by *sound* has the codes of warcries, drumbeats, gongs, factory hooters, morse, sirens, doorbells, etc. Men have quickly learned to decode these. But laughter or sobbing are not always easy. National anthems and pastoral symphonies convey their meaning readily; but not so most music to the uninitiated.

All words are codes. 'D-o-g' only represents a particular animal, and only to those who speak English. 'Le chien' or 'der Hund' are codes of equal value, but without meaning to those unfamiliar with French or German.

But confusion is common where words have more than one meaning, are used differently by different disciplines or cultural groups.

Another factor involved here is interpretation of tone. For example, how many meanings can be conveyed by the printed words, 'Hello there, John'? Don't they range from 'Great to see you' through 'Hoped you'd make it', and 'Didn't really expect you this evening!' to 'Oh, no! Not you again!'? And how many attitudes can be conveyed in the words: 'Shut the door, please'? This depends on where emphasis is placed and on the tone of voice.

The spoken word carries emotion as well as meaning, and intonation can convey anger, joy, grief, sarcasm, panic, etc. And speech could not exist without silences.

'*Sign-language*' is used universally where words are out of place, or impossible, when they fail, or where they need emphasis. Where a mutual understanding of such codes exists, it is a major means of communication. The steadiness or furtiveness of a gaze, the raised eyebrows, the wink, the open smile, the firm or generous mouth, the anguished look, the tiny or enlarged pupils, the nod, the shake of the head, the shrug

of the shoulders, thumbs up or down, the rude gesticulation - all get their message across fast. Even the condition of the skin (flushed, dry, pallid, perspiring) communicates subtle meanings about states of being.

Every sign is a code and requires to be mutually understood if communication is not to break down. Tibetans put out their tongue to say 'I wish you well'; the Spanish sign for 'Come here!' is the British sign for 'Go away!'; and a slow handclap on the Continent is a request for an encore. Not even the nod for 'Yes' is world-wide - many countries shake the head from side to side.

The *visual* includes scenery, poetry, painting, sculpture, cartoons, posters, plans, personal appearance, photography and film, etc. Sign language became signals as in semaphore, deaf and dumb language, marshalling aircraft, skin divers, firemen, croupiers in casinos. Image speaks directly to the imagination without going through the process of abstraction and rational evaluation. The Oxfam photograph of a starving child is not simply an alternative to words, but more appropriate.

Related - and much underused in Britain - is communication by *touch*. We accept the child's need to nestle in his mother's arms, to hug and be hugged, to explore the texture of things. We know the infinite variety of tactile communication open to a couple in love. Boys wrestle in the playground, and girls sit hand in hand; the teenager punches his pal and receives a counter-punch confirming friendship. And the adult feels free publicly to embrace in times of high emotion. Communication by touch is for many more powerful and often more appropriate. To a bereaved friend, for example, the strength of a handshake or a hand on the shoulder mean much more than words.

The 'feel' of things is vastly important to our lives - a guide dog's leading of his master, braille, softness, hardness, furriness, smoothness.

Again, *smell* communicates. Cooking and baking awake responses according to the smell that gives us pleasure. The smell of new-cut grass, of fresh apples and coffee, of hair, of sweat - each is a distinctive code. And it is linked to *taste*. Were we eating in the dark, the taste of most food would communicate to us what we were eating.

Perhaps the most powerful medium is *action*. This is because it is all at the level of reality and not at one or two removes from it. To the lad standing on one's foot it is possible either to ask him politely to move back, or to assist him with a shove. To punch someone on the jaw is communication by direct

action; so is a kiss. But the punch might be an accident or a case of mistaken identity, or intended in fun, and the kiss may be one of love or treachery. Possessions and clothing can be chosen to communicate something. Participation in a movement or party can do the same. To demonstrate that one has a particular understanding or skill is yet another way of using this medium.

MULTI-MEDIA

A lad comes to see the youth worker in his flat and is greeted with a friendly 'Come on in, then!' (sound). The worker switches on the fire and puts a chair near it (action); he beckons the lad to sit down (gesture), and smiles (sign-language). The room smells of tobacco and beer (smell) and is quite untidy (image). The lad is receiving messages from all kinds of sources, decoding, interpreting, etc. All of this will affect his relationship and the total communication situation. But will he interpret aright? The switching on of the fire - was the worker being thoughtful? Or thinking of his own comfort? The untidy room - did it indicate a careless, slapdash person? Or one who had been with a lad the local police station from early morning? This situation reminds us of the complexity of communication and of its total nature. It also illustrates the possibilities for misunderstanding.

DISTORTION AND BREADOWN

If the message in the mind of T does not get to the mind of R intact, what factors have prevented full communication? Some of these arise in encoding, some in transmission, and some in decoding, and are known as *noise*. Examples of 'semantic' noise in T or R would be lack of familiarity with the code or medium, use of technical words, jargon, dialect or heavy regional accent, obscurity, vagueness, rambling, words meaning different things because of different social or cultural backgrounds, or wrong choice being made where a code stands for more than one idea, differing presuppositions, hostility on the part of R at the absence of opportunity for dialogue, etc.

Examples of 'mechanical' noise would be background chatter, crackling on a line, bad print, noise from outside traffic, slurred speech, dull hearing, a heavy cold on the part of T, tiredness, uncomfortable seating, distraction by an attractive person or by the unkempt appearance of T, distrust of T, or T's insensitivity, too little or too much information.

It is essential to accurate communication that T and R know and use the same code. To the extent that different meanings are

given to the code, to that extent communication is distorted. In speech this occurs most obviously with different languages but holds true with different cultural or social usages of words and expressions, and where words have more than one meaning. Signs, too, may be misread, as when an apprehensive smile is taken for a sneer, or when the blasting of a car horn can mean the summoning of a friend, a slip of the hand or 'Move off! **!!**!'

Added to this is the fact that the medium itself is communicating all the time. Often the message which the medium itself is, differs from the message its user is trying to convey. Some media, for example, assert the dominance of T and the dependence of R while the content of their message is participation and mutual discovery. (Sermons have problems here.) In a contradiction between content and context, context usually wins. T's non-verbal communication will be more successful than his words. To be fully credible there should be a total correlation.

FEEDBACK

In view of the complexity of communication the T who wants to be understood welcomes feedback from R. In face-to-face relationships this happens a great deal. Feedback comes in nodding agreement, uh-huh's, raised eyebrows, smiles, laughter, applause, booing, yawning, puzzlement, time-watching, etc. The more feedback, the more likely that T can modify his presentation and get across his message. The feedback itself, of course, is communication from R to T. What may appear to be monologue seldom is - except in the most authoritarian and insensitive of communicators.

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA

We have done but scant justice to an area addressed by a dozen sciences. We cannot conclude without emphasizing that the electronic has revolutionized communications. McLuhan's thesis is important. With print, ideas and knowledge became absorbed in linear, one-at-a-time form. We entered an era of abstraction, analysis, logic and objectivity. The emotional, concrete, imaginative, non-rational, personal had little place. But the electronic media have returned man to total communication and altered the pattern of perceiving and thinking. Print detribalized; the electronic has re-tribalized. A new mode of human consciousness is arising. So McLuhan. And we must wrestle with it. For communication in each generation is inextricably bound to God's mission.