

CONCLUSION

And so we draw towards the end. And it is therefore time to refer back to the Introduction, to clarify how we started on our approach to the study of communication. The process school, with its common-sense model of communication, has many attractions. It appears more functional; it can encourage us to improve our skills of communication which will then enable us to impose ourselves on the world around us more effectively. It sees communication as a determinant, and improving communication as a way of increasing social control. Hence its attractive and interesting studies of the audience, of the effects of communication. It is, to put it succinctly, the advertising executive's view.

But semiotics, deriving largely from Saussure and Peirce, is concerned not with the transmission of messages but with the generation and exchange of meanings. The emphasis here is not on stages in the process, but on the text and its interaction with its producing/receiving culture: the focus is on the role of communication in establishing and maintaining values and on how those values enable communication to have meaning. Saussure's and Peirce's interest in the nature of the sign itself, rather than in how it is transmitted, signals this change of focus. This school has no concept of a breakdown in communication and is not much concerned with efficiency and accuracy. Communication must occur: a case in which my meaning differs from your meaning is not seen as a communication failure, but as indicative of social or cultural differences between us. And divergence of meanings is not necessarily, of itself, a bad thing: it may, indeed, be a source of cultural richness and of subcultural maintenance. If we wish to minimize the divergence of meanings we should not, according to this school, seek to achieve this by improving the efficiency of the communication process, but by

minimizing the social differences. In other words, the determinants of communication lie in society and the world around us, not in the process itself.

This means, of course, that cultural and social differences must inevitably produce what the process school would see as breakdowns in communication. In industrial organizations, to take a fraught and topical example, disputes are frequently blamed on a breakdown in communication. This is a process-school explanation. A semiotician would say that there is no such thing as a breakdown of communication: when the workforce find a meaning that is different from that of management in the words or actions of managers, this is a manifestation of socio-cultural differences: it is, itself, a message about social relations within the firm and within society, and will not therefore be put right by improvements in the efficiency of the communication process.

Another currently topical example is that of televised violence. The process-school proponents see a direct linear link between violence in the television message and its effect of causing violence in the receiver. Semioticians would argue that if the reader is moved to violence, then we must look for the causes of violence in his or her socio-cultural experience as well as in the television message, and that no amount of change of this television message will, by itself, reduce violence in society.

It is not my intention to suggest that there is a right and a wrong way to study communication. But there are ways that are more or less fruitful. In my opinion the semiotic school addresses itself to the more important questions in communication, and is the more useful in helping us to understand the myriad examples that we meet with in our daily lives. But I certainly do not think that it can provide all the answers. The more empirical work of the process school is often needed to fill dangerous gaps left by semiotics. It is a pity that proponents of each school have tended to ignore or denigrate the work of the other: I am pleased that some recent work (such as that by Gerbner or Morley) is showing signs that the two can be brought closer together. I hope that this book will also contribute to this end.

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