

Communication Basics

CST 201: Media Tools

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Overview

This lecture covers two major topics:

- the “basics” of human communication
- the core aspects and goals of communication design

It concludes with a practice activity that will help you finalize your preparations for class.

Communication Basics

This section on the “basics” of human communication covers the dimensions of human communication, the three basic acts of human communication, and the semiotic rules of human communication. The section concludes with a working definition of communication.

The Dimensions of Communication

Human communication is usually described along a few major dimensions: the message, the source, the form, and the channel. For this example, let’s consider this poster from the WPA Poster Collection in the Library of Congress. It’s a poster announcing a Federal Theatre Project presentation of “Ready! Aim! Fire!” at the Hollywood Playhouse.¹



Message

First, you’ve got the message, or, the thing or “stuff” that is communicated. In this case, the message is, essentially: “If you want to come see the world explode, you’d better show up at this time and place.”

Source

The source is the sender, or, in other words: who sent the message. In this case, poster was created by the Federal Theater Project to announce the show.

Form

The form relates to the construction of the message. Is it auditory, visual, or both? With this poster, it’s visual only.

Channel

The channel is the medium of choice for sending the message. In this case, the channel is the poster as signage in public areas.

Test Yourself

1. Think of your own communication act: a conversation between two people. Draw a picture of the act and then label all the parts.
2. Think back to the WPA poster. In today’s digital world, what might be the options for form and channel that may improve the chances of reaching a wider audience?

¹ Picture: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, WPA Poster Collection, [LC-USZC2-5538 DLC]

Three Basic Acts

When it comes to human communication, there are three basic types of communicative acts:

- conferring knowledge or experience
- giving advice or commands
- asking questions

Conferring knowledge or experience is, essentially – telling somebody else what you know or what happened:

“I caught a HUGE fish on Saturday.”

Giving advice or commands is pretty straightforward too – telling someone to do something:

“Please pass the salt.”

- or -

“Somebody call an ambulance!!!!”

And, of course...asking questions is also fairly straightforward:

“What is your favorite color?”

- or -

“How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?”

But, wait! What about Rhetorical Questions?

Obviously, there is some overlap here: it’s usually the case that someone will be conferring some amount of knowledge or experience when giving advice (but probably not commands), and it is possible in a particular situation that the best way to give advice may be to ask a question – such as:

“Have you thought about what the consequences of your actions may be?”

Before we move on to semiotics, let's summarize, review, and extend. Regarding Human Communication, here are a few final things to think about:

- Communication acts can take many forms
- Form depends on capabilities of communication participants
- Communication content and form make messages that are sent to some destination
- The target destination can be oneself, another person, or another group (such as a business)

Test Yourself

1. Think of at least three distinct examples where the capabilities of communication participants affects the form of the message being communicated.
2. Think of at least one example of communicating the same message to yourself, another person, and another group.

Semiotic Rules of Communication

Before we dive into the semiotic rules of communication, you may be wondering exactly what semiotics actually is. Before you read the next section, think for a second about three different ways you could find out more about what semiotics. Stop reading and go do them right now, if you'd like. This will be here when you get back. :)

What is Semiotics?

Basically, semiotics is the *study of meaning in communication*.

To accomplish such study, communication can be seen as processes of information transmission governed by three levels of semiotic rules: syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic rules.

Syntactic Rules

Syntactic rules are concerned with the *formal properties of signs and symbols* – kind of like grammar and punctuation.

For example, without rules to govern how sentences are structured, coherent written communication would be nearly impossible. There would be no coherence because there would be no common, basic form for everyone to rely upon.



Look at all these road signs. Each one means something specific, but there are some commonalities amongst them, including shapes and colors, that serve as a set of syntactic rules for motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians. For example, yellow “diamond” signs indicate a necessity for caution, and orange diamond signs indicate a temporary need for caution -- something is up ahead that isn’t usually there, so you’d better slow down a little and pay even closer attention to the road!!!

The blue square indicates that this is some sort of information that could come in handy. Often, these signs are added to other signage. For example, you’ll typically see the blue H sign attached to highway exits that lead to hospitals. Once you’ve reached the end of the ramp, another blue H sign with a directional arrow will show you the way to get to the hospital.

Look at the red triangle sign. It’s not something you’ll see in the United States (unless you or a “sticky-fingered” friend have traveled to other nations). However, I’d be willing to bet you’ve already figured out the basic message of the sign.

Pragmatic Rules

Pragmatic rules are concerned with the *relations between signs, symbols, or expressions and their users* – both senders and receivers. To think of pragmatic rules in another way, they are rules which govern “social norms” of communication, often concerning key cultural and social rules that govern interpersonal relationships.

For example: consider the “thumbs up” expression pictured here. This is generally considered to be a positive symbol, but in some cultures it is extremely negative, perhaps even punishable as a crime.



Test Yourself

1. Do some quick research to find at least three different cultures (or countries) where the “thumbs up” symbol is good, and three where it is bad.
2. Beyond hand gestures, what other sorts of signs, symbols, or expressions that have specific social norms from one culture to the next. [Hint: think about the many cultures you interact with.]

Semantic Rules

Semantic rules are concerned with the *relations between signs, symbols, or expressions and what they represent*. In other words, semantics are the agreed-upon definitions of words. These rules are specific to each language and to each group of symbols in the language. There are often multiple meanings of the same word in a given language.



For example, consider the term “conservative.” How many different meanings can you think of? If a person is called “conservative” what does that really mean? Are they conserving something?

Test Yourself

1. Look up “conservative” in any dictionary. How many definitions are provided?
2. Pick another term. How many different meanings does it have?

Adventures with Semantics: A Quick Story

Close your eyes. Think about the time you last went to a sandwich delicatessen – or any business with a deli counter or case. Somewhere in the vicinity of the food being served in this establishment, there was likely a sign with the following phrase:

“Made Fresh Daily”

The assumption you as the customer likely made was that the sandwiches in the case were made fresh that day in the store in which you then stood. However, let’s imagine all the sandwiches in the case were wrapped in some cellophane, looking a little less than fresh -- and let’s consider the semantics of the sign, one word at a time.

MADE	FRESH	DAILY
<p>Made? These sandwiches were indeed manufactured.</p> <p>Where? When? With or without toxic chemicals?</p>	<p>Fresh?</p> <p>Yes, at some point, the ingredients of which this sandwich were constructed were indeed fresh - either out of the ground, cut from an animal, or concocted in a chemistry lab.</p>	<p>Daily? This implies new manufacture each day.</p> <p>GloboChem Sandwichery Conglomerate, Inc. may churn out millions of cellophane wrapped chemical concoctions each day, indeed.</p>

But how long does it take the chicken salad sandwich you’re eyeballing in the case at the local Starbucks inside your local Target to get from the Globochem factory in some third-world country to the inside of your digestive track?

Made. Fresh. Daily.

I’m getting hungry already. Maybe it’s time to stop for a little while and go make a snack...but before you do, let’s close out the first part of the lecture with the formulation of a working definition of human communication.

Communication: A Working Definition

Communication is social interaction where at least two interacting agents share a common set of signs and a common set of semiotic rules.

Test Yourself

1. This is a working definition of communication. Take a shot at improving it.
2. Then go get your snack.

Communication Design

So we've gotten through a pretty good overview of what human communication is and how it happens. And, since the degree you'll have when you graduate from this institution will likely include the words Communication Design, the logical next step is to explore what goes into *designing for* human communication. It seems simple: make things that help humans communicate. I think we all know – based on our own personal communication experiences – that it's never quite that simple. Communication design is a mixed discipline which involves a unique interplay between the message and the medium. Communication design also includes systems for communication. Most importantly, though...it's about getting people to communicate, which involves human behavior. We'll close out this section with a look at the four big goals of communication design regarding human behavior.

Mixed Discipline

The most generic interpretation of what communication design entails is this: *orchestrating the relationship between people and information*. Because of this, communication design is often seen as a “mixed” discipline, straddling several different fields of design (such as visual, auditory, environmental, and interactive design) and information development. Think back to the four dimensions of communication: message, source, form, and channel. The message is the information that is developed, the form is what is designed. So, in other words, making decisions about what should or should be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, and touched in order to accomplish the intended communication is the *form* under consideration in communication design. Making decisions about which information to include in the message that takes this form is also part of communication design, and if necessary this can also include construction (or rearrangement) of information to be included in the message.

For an example, let's think about storytelling – specifically a story about a car wreck. As a communication designer, what would be your decision-making process to successfully design, develop, and deliver the “car wreck story” message? Let's step through the process. First: what is the message? How much information should be included in the message? (Hint: this depends on the targeted audience.) Next: what form should the message take in order to best communicate the information to the intended audience? What should be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, and/or touched?

Smelled? Is that even possible? Most of the time, no. In fact, the possibilities for the form any message can take rely on the affordances of the channels available for sending the message. In other words, different channels provide different limitations (and opportunities) for what form the message can take. Simply put, *you can't send pictures through the radio*.

Test Yourself

Pick your favorite home-cooked meal. Step through the design decision process for communicating the recipe via the internet. How many different versions can you come up with? Which forms work best? Why? Think about how designing for different audiences might affect your decisions.

The Message and the Medium

Thinking back to the dimensions of communication (message, source, form, and channel), the medium is, essentially, the channel. Books, radio, television, the Internet – these are all channels and mediums. Think about how a message could be conveyed over two different mediums. For example, take Project Gutenberg², a web-based publisher of free electronic book (ebook) versions of previously published works that have expired from copyright protection. So, a book that used to be only available via bound paper copies is now also available through a second medium (channel) – the Internet. The text can be read on the Internet or downloaded and read on a variety of different types of computers.

When it comes to communication design, the medium(s) chosen by the designer can affect the recipient's interpretation of the message. How so? Think back to the final sentiment from the previous section: you can't send pictures through the radio. As a medium, radio can't handle visual content. Now think about the opposite: A television show with no images, only sound. The screen is black for the duration of the show, and all the recipient can consume is auditory information: music, dialogue, atmospheric sounds, and sound effects – much like old radio shows such as *The Shadow*.³ While “watching” the blank show on television, the recipient would likely find the show to be odd, and think to herself: “Wait...WHY is this show on television? I can't SEE anything!”

Basically, as we become more and more familiar with each new type of channel that comes along, our ability to understand its uses and possibilities becomes more sophisticated. If a communication designer makes a bad decision and sends a message through an inappropriate medium, the intended recipients will be bothered by this mismatch, and their experience will be soured. This is just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. In reality, there is a LOT more to this aspect of communication concerning the effect of the medium upon the message, but hopefully you get the basic idea.

A Systems-Based Approach

Thinking back to the idea mentioned in the previous section concerning the generation of new channels or mediums (such as the Internet), there is another aspect of communication design to understand: communication design can refer to a systems-based approach to facilitating communication. In other words, some communication designers create entirely new systems for communication.

Typically, a communication system refers to a single integrated network of processes to control the the totality of media and messages within a particular culture or organization. As an example, think about the White House briefing room⁴, which is intended to serve as a clearinghouse for all public messages generating from a single source – the executive branch of the United States government.



2 <http://www.gutenberg.org/>

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Shadow#Radio_program

4 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/>

Test Yourself

Think about various organizations in which you participate: companies, teams, clubs, churches, etc.

- See if you can identify and describe two different communication systems for these organizations.
- How could these systems be improved? (Hint: message, source, form, and channel...)

Four Goals: Attract, Inspire, Desire, Response

Finally, communication design is concerned with targeted audiences – specific groups of people intended as recipients of one or more messages. As a designer, you have four major goals for this targeted audience: attract them to your message, inspire them with your message, and create desire in them with your message, and motivate them to respond to your message.

To achieve these goals, you *must understand your targeted audience*. Typically, this involves quite a bit of research and user testing. As an example, let's consider the “typical” college student in the 21st century – more specifically, a person between the ages of 18 and 23 attending college straight out of high school. Let's think about how to achieve each of the four goals with this type of message recipient.

Attract

You might think that the first question you need to ask is, “What does your audience find attractive?” Well, in a sense, yes. However, the better way to phrase the question is, “How do I get my recipient to pay attention to my message in the first place?” This leads to two other questions:

- Which form(s) should I use?
- Which channel(s) should I use?

For our typical college student, some forms and channels are likely more attractive than others (e.g., video vs. text). Of course, this all depends on different demographic issues – such as gender. Which forms and channels would females find more attractive than males, and vice versa? Can you think of other demographic differences that would have a direct affect on your design decisions for attracting your audience?

When it comes to attracting your recipients, the bottom line is that you have to get them to consume the message in the first place. Most likely this means that the message will need to be delivered in a variety of forms across a multitude of channels.

Inspire

What does it mean to inspire your audience? There are several actual definitions of the word inspire, but here we are generally concerned with the idea of *influencing or guiding* the recipient of the message. Why are we influencing them? What are we guiding them toward? We want the recipient to do the action inherent in the response (our fourth goal). If you're designing a public service announcement to stop college students from smoking – your message needs to inspire them to stop

smoking by influencing them and guiding them toward that goal.

Two things come in very handy for this influential approach to inspiration: *information and emotion*. If, as a designer, you can accurately affect a recipient's emotions, you're halfway to inspiration. Providing valuable, easy-to-understand information is the other half of the equation – this is the guiding part. If someone is influenced emotionally to quit smoking but they don't have a plan, it's probably not going to happen. You've got to give them that plan – or at least give them access to the plan, such as through an informational website.

When it comes to inspiring your recipients, the bottom line is that an inspired recipient is one who can identify with the message, and (through influence) align his or her values with the message (and source). They then feel good about the idea of the intended behavior indicated by the message (in this case: smoking cessation). *An inspired recipient should also be an informed recipient*.

Create Desire

Continuing with the concept of emotional influence, the message you design should create some level of desire in the recipient. In the case of smoking cessation, the recipient should have an increased desire to actually quit smoking. Depending on the audience and the message, creating desire can be rather easy or difficult. Consider our college student: is it easier to create desire to buckle down and study or to spend the day hanging with friends at the beach (or going to a party or concert, etc.)?

In any case, the bottom line for this goal of creating desire is that you as a designer are attempting to change the recipient's mind. To do this, the message must generate a perceived need or want that will lead to the recipient changing his or her mind about the topic conveyed in the message. In other words...if a person is going to change his mind about smoking, the information in your message needs to help him or her change his mind about smoking – through the process of generating the perceived need or want (to change his/her mind) by way of emotional influence.

OK, so there were quite a few repetitions in that paragraph. That's because when it comes to these goals, there is quite a bit of overlap between the first three. Most of this overlap between these three goals is due to the psychological factors of communication, and also that these three goals are all oriented toward the fourth goal: motivating a response.

Motivate Response

Let's see how far we've gotten: you've attracted your recipient to your message, they've consumed it, and they're inspired to the point of overwhelming desire. Now, you've got to get them to do something about it. You can't bring them all this way emotionally without a *payoff* for the recipient (satisfaction of following through with desire) *and* your client (another smoker kicking the habit).

To transform this desire into an actual response, you must give the recipient a mechanism for actually responding to the message (and therefore acting upon the desire). For example, the recipient that desires to stop smoking should be able to easily transition from consuming the message to acquiring the means for quitting – such as, perhaps, a “stop smoking” kit available for free (or a fee) on a website.

Think about another example: a charitable organization soliciting donations. The charity wants to

inspire the desire to donate large sums of cash from recipients of its messages. If this charitable organization is smart, it will give them easy access to as many different ways to donate as are available – mailing a check, calling a phone number, or visiting a page on the website for the organization.

The designer of the messages for the charitable organization should include all the necessary information about these possible ways to donate as part of the message to the recipient. In fact, the designer should make it as easy as possible for the recipient to donate – such as including a “click to donate” link in an email or social media marketing campaign. Such an opportunity is an example of the ideal situation: allowing a recipient to act upon their desire when these levels of desire are fresh and emotionally intense.

Test Yourself

Go to the Apple movie trailers website⁵ and pick one trailer that attracts you and one that doesn't. For each trailer, think about who the intended audience actually is. The overarching goal of the trailer is to get people to watch the movie in the theater. For each of the two trailers, think about how the targeted audience is attracted and inspired. Think about how desire is created. Think about how a response (go to the theater) is motivated.

Also, look through the list of projects for this class, read the project descriptions, and go through this same thought process for each of the projects – especially the Poster and the Interactive Map. Think about the type of people who are in your target audience and how they are attracted, inspired, etc. by other things in their lives. Write down some initial thoughts you have for achieving each of these four goals with your projects.

5 <http://trailers.apple.com/>

A Practice Activity

This is a timeline that shows the history of chlorine.

Most common compound: Sodium Chloride (NaCl) → rock salt 3000 BC → brine 6000 BC

- 1785 = textile bleach
Passing chlorine gas over dry slaked lime ($\text{Ca}(\text{OH})_2$), gives bleaching powder.
 - 1826 = photographic images (silver chloride)
 - 1847 = anesthetic (chloroform) and germicide (hypochlorite)
 - 1850 = John Snow disinfects London water supply → cholera
 - 1918 = US Treasury calls for massive water disinfection with Chlorine
 - 1912 = Polyvinylchloride (PVC) invented → initially without purpose
 - 1915 = Chlorine Gas first used as a weapon → April 22 at Ypres by the German Army
results were disastrous → gas masks not yet invented
-

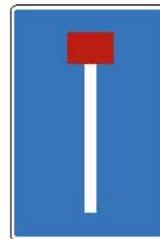
What is wrong with this information and the way it is displayed?

Create a better timeline. How else could such chronological information be better presented?

Use your imagination!

1. Sketch out your own improved version of this timeline - text and visuals! Bring your sketches and ideas with you to class!
2. Find at least four different examples of illustrated timeline graphics: two good examples, and two bad examples.
Be prepared to discuss them in your groups: Why are they good? Why are they bad?

The Bonus Round



See if you can figure out what these two signs mean. Write down your answers. Be creative!