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The Past of Communication's Hoped-For Future

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The Past of Communication's Hoped-For Future

by Klaus Krippendorff, University of Pennsylvania

In this essay I am suggesting that much of communication scholarship to date has been message driven and that this dominant form of explaining what communication is or does is slowly being challenged by what one may call reflexive explanations. This discursive perturbation offers researchers the choice of either narrowing their domain of inquiry to where message-driven explanations can be enforced, or embarking on an exciting path of reconstructing our field.

Let me begin by stating what I see as three defining features of message-driven explanations and then consider some of their fruits.

First, messages are *objectively describable* compositions, texts, or events. They are created to be *moveable* from one physical location or context to another or *reproducible* at different places or times. They thus exist in an objective reality and independent of anyone receiving them. References to intertextuality, message systems, or situational structures do not substantially alter the subject-independence of this starting point of message-driven explanations.

Second, messages *affect*, persuade, inform, stimulate, or arouse those exposed to them. Whatever messages cause or bring to their receivers, their contents, the symbolic qualities they have, are believed carried in their composition or structure and must therefore be explained or be theorized *as a function of these objective properties*. Cognition is simplified to a linear process of responding to or interpreting given messages.

Third, *exposure to the same messages causes commonalities* among senders and receivers, and, in the case of the mass media, among audience members. This gives "communication" its social significance and a standard for evaluating its success. So, deviations from expected commonalities become individual failures, misinterpretations, ideological or cognitive biases, noise, systemic distortions, and so on.

Thus, message-driven explanations are both *objectivist* and implicitly *normative*.

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The End of Theories We Grew Up With

Message-driven explanations have ancient roots—for example, in the rhetoricians' search for linguistic forms that make arguments compelling. Their modern incarnation comes from journalism. Journalists see themselves as writing newspapers and magazines that were created to be mass produced and *uniformly comprehensible* to their readers. When new media such as radio and TV came along, and when interpersonal encounters, political events, and organizational processes came to be seen as communication as well, the printed message quickly became the dominant metaphor for conceptualizing them. The fact that discrete messages were not so obviously, if at all, identifiable in these new media; that differences in interpersonal skills, accessibility, and authority had no place in these explanations; and that definitions of community or of a public based on common exposure to messages became empirically untenable, did not prevent communication researchers from refining message-driven explanations.

In fact, Lasswell (1948) codified the field, its research questions and explanations, by *defining communication research* as providing answers to the five questions: "Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effects." To date, his formula defines many communication research designs. In the same year, Berelson and Lazarsfeld (1948) finished their conception of content analysis as an "objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication," promising scientific accounts of what messages carry to everyone with access to them. Also in 1948, Shannon (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) first published *A Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Many communication researchers immediately embraced his terminology, probably for the scientific legitimacy a mathematically founded concept accorded to inquiries into communication, including the mass media (Schramm, 1954, 1955). However, only Shannon's diagram and Weaver's popular commentary on the theory entered the bulk of communications literature. Although the theory extended our vocabulary—adding such terms as *redundancy* and the *encoding* and *decoding* of messages—Shannon's statistical and relativist measure of information quickly became equated with news, or the stuff that messages "objectively" contain. After these basic notions were in place, message-driven explanations mushroomed. Without reviewing the many and more increasingly sophisticated versions of message-driven explanations that developed from these early beginnings, let me simply suggest that they now permeate the exemplars in our field: studies correlating message variables and effects, inquiries into the effectiveness of different message designs, use of mathematical theories to predict attitude changes from media exposure, and so forth. None of these regard the human participants in the progress as capable of making up their own meanings, negotiating relationships among themselves, and reflecting on their own realities.

Where message-driven conceptions of communication entered serious empirical tests, they turned out to be of limited explanatory value. For example, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) found evidence that led them to replace the hypodermic needle conception of mass media effects with a *two-step flow model*. The first step involved exposure to the media and the second an informal opinion-creating process mediated by opinion leaders. Klapper's (1960) massive review of the effects literature concluded that the mass media had rather limited abilities to shape their audience members' lives. His conclusions were criticized because (a) his review was sponsored by the networks who, being under public scrutiny, had an interest in its outcome; and (b) industry would not continue to finance the mass media through its advertising without reasonable expectations of a return on its investment. A more likely explanation for Klapper's findings is that message-driven conceptions just don't work. Obviously, the effects researchers, their reviewer Klapper, and his critics' responses to the mass media and to each other could hardly be explained in causal terms.

Faced with these apparent failures, scholars came up with new conceptions. In the beginning these conceptions appeared to be mere stopgap measures, designed to keep linear causal explanations in place. But they also provided the seeds for alternatives to the dominant accounting practices. Let me mention some of these.

One is the *uses and gratifications approach*. This approach can be traced to propaganda effects studies during World War II and to Berelson's (1949) study of what missing the newspaper meant during a strike in New York City. Inquiries into the social and psychological needs, sources of expectations, and gratifications derived from mass media attendance led proponents Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) to turn the message determinism the other way. How audience members *used* these messages was found to be far from uniformly distributed among audience members. There was no obvious message determinism of effects.

Another and far further going approach can be seen in the *information-seeking paradigm* (e.g., Donohew & Tipton, 1973). Here, "objective" contents of messages are largely irrelevant. Individuals are seen as actively engaged in diverse information seeking, avoiding, and processing strategies, which turn out to be explainable in terms of their "image of reality," their "goals, beliefs, and knowledge." Information no longer is explainable from the properties of message alone. Senders or producers no longer play the central role that message-driven explanations assigned to them.

In organizational communication research, a so-called *interpretive approach* (e.g., Putnam & Pacanowski, 1983) has become increasingly appealing. It centers on the way individuals make sense of their world through communicative behaviors, and it attempts to explain choices in terms of prevailing "organizational cultures" or working climates to which members of an organization come to be committed. It holds that *mean-*

ings are created and negotiated, neither objectively given nor assignable by a scientific authority. Individual participation in a social network of interaction, not the messages, become the explanatory basis of outcomes and effects.

Probably the most productive demonstration of the not so minimal effects of mass communication is the research on the media's ability to *create issues* and *set agendas* for public opinion and action (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Clearly, issues, agendas, and controversies exist neither outside language nor without political actors' understanding. They are part of the very public discourse within which mass media institutions and mass media audiences constitute themselves. Their *reality resides in the playing of a public game* of, albeit unequal, participation. One aspect of this unequal participation has been theorized as the so-called "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1984), which adds to the setting of agendas participants' perception of each others' opinions on issues; it attempts to predict the emergence of certain political realities by processes analogous to self-fulfilling prophecies.

Sources of Breakdown and Alternatives

Actually, communication research is comparatively late in experiencing such breakdowns of message-driven explanations which, while still rampant in public and everyday discourses, have been dismissed in other disciplines for different reasons.

The breakdown of the popular notion of language as descriptive or representative of an objective world external to us and separate from language has been slow in coming, but it now enters the study of communication at numerous not so obvious entry points. It started with the Wittgensteinian notion of *language as a game people play*, was paralleled in the Whorfian hypothesis of *linguistic relativity*, and has recently led to the search for more adequate accounts of meaning in terms of the *cognitive schemas* underlying the understanding of linguistic constructions (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987). Here, the objectivism in message-driven explanations is quite explicitly and thoroughly discredited and replaced by an experientialist alternative.

Social *constructivists* have shown that "facts"—from emotions to persons, gender, language, and cultural institutions—are *socially constructed*, in the sense of having been *invented*, perhaps at a time no longer accessible to individual memories (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) or from behind the facade of political institutions (Edelman, 1977), now being habitually reproduced by its participants. Constructivists can be divided into three camps. The first maintains the belief in an observer-independent reality relative to which constructions by the media and by ordinary people could be compared and verified. In the opinion research literature, Lippman was an early proponent of this view. Boorstin (1964) still believes he

can distinguish pseudo-events from real ones. Tuchman (1974) considers news as constructed by the way the mass media are organized, and Gitlin (1979) demonstrates how hegemonic processes account for TV entertainment. Efforts to deconstruct social phenomena by showing how real social institutions, hegemonic forces, and power structures are responsible for them belong here as well. This approach—some call it *trivial constructivism*—is unable to take institutions, structures of domination, ideologies, and so forth, including the reality referred to in explaining these phenomena, as *the analysts' constructions*.

The second group, the *social constructionists*, tie themselves to the later Wittgenstein and subsequent natural language philosophers by arguing that all social phenomena can be explained by reference to language. Foucault (e.g., 1989) exemplifies a grand semiotic version of this view. Gergen (1985), his collaborators, and several discourse analysts—few of which build on Foucault's work—have shown how persons, emotions, gender, (self-)identity, taboos, and so forth are constructed and negotiated in language. They see no need to refer to facts outside of language. From their perspective, the mass media do not merely construct a public reality, they also construct themselves into it.

Finally, *radical constructivists* (Glaserfeld, 1991; Watzlawick, 1984), joining hands with second-order cyberneticians (Foerster, 1974; Mead, 1968) and with biological cognitivists (Maturana & Varela, 1987), go beyond language determinism by insisting that internal and external *reality* is omnipresent but *not knowable without constructive participation* by its observers. This seriously challenges the claim of privileged access to reality as a basis of scientific authority, questions the use of this metaphysics by scientists to justify their role as intellectually superior observers of less sophisticated others, and criticizes the failure of researchers to reflect on their own cognitive participation in the phenomena they claim to describe. It radically doubts anyone's ability to provide objective accounts of the meanings messages have for others and thereby removes the ground of message-driven explanations. Radical constructivists also embrace an important demand of feminist theory (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) to treat *knowledge* not as abstract and freely transmittable, but as *embodied in a knower* who supplies his or her own terms for understanding, embracing both intellectual and emotional experiences. This means that no knowledge can exist outside knowers and that all facts have their factors, their makers. This constructivism is radical because its conceptual framework grants *no epistemological exceptions* to scientific observers, constructivists included.

Let me offer just one example of the kind of message-driven research whose unreflected claims I find increasingly offensive. Recently, I attended a workshop on the effects of television on children. A good part of it was devoted to *children's understanding*. Proceeding from commitments to message-driven explanations, the researcher exposed children to selected TV images and tested for what they could recall and correctly iden-

tify. The findings of these experiments were graphed and presented as showing how children's understanding improved with age. A constructivist critic might ask how and whose understanding is being articulated here: Clearly, the commitment to message-driven explanations was the researcher's, not the children's. What counted as messages (what the TV images depicted) was decided by the researcher, not by the children. And although children live, at least in my experience, in a very imaginative, fantastically rich, and certainly more varied world than adults do, the researcher allowed as data only what he could cast into the categories of his own operationalized understanding. The children's did not matter. The researcher observed no more than how well children's (unobserved) understanding conformed to his well articulated expectations of what children should see or do if they were more like him and less like the children they were. He acted as the self-appointed agent of an objective, shared, and adult world in which and to which children are expected to adjust, and explored no more than *his own preconceptions*, using children, much as they are used in society—as convenient props. Message-driven studies obviously *disrespect others' understanding*. The claim to have studied children's understanding is not sustainable in the face of the apparent intellectual imperialism.

One alternative to the above is the anthropologist Wagner's (1981) conception of culture. In the minds of objectivists, culture usually ends up being a causal agent of overwhelming power. For Wagner it becomes the anthropologists' way of explaining their encounters with people other than their own. Respecting, yet not grasping, the emergence of otherness in conversation, feeling the loss of certainties that everyday communication does afford, experiencing breakdown in the taken-for-grantedness of common sense, leads the analyst to invent and the interlocutors to co-construct something both can live with. For reflexive anthropologists, this entails *reinventing their own culture*. Applied to the research example, Wagner might suggest listening to the children's stories with wonder and trying to make sense of why they tell us, if they do, what they see in terms of our understanding of their understanding of us. In such a reflexive loop, we might learn at least to appreciate children's ways of seeing. We might also come to understand something about our own understanding of, for instance, how constrained we have allowed ourselves to become.

In the above, I see a new convergence of natural language philosophy, ethnography and cognitivism in linguistics, social and radical constructivism, second-order cybernetics, reflexive sociology, and the above mentioned responses to the failures of message-driven explanations (not just in mass communication), to which one might add efforts to understand the new interactive media (computer interfaces, hyper-media, virtual reality) that have so far defied traditional theorizing. The epistemology of this new constructivism calls into question whether we could have communicated the way we said we did.

Consider the rather sketchy history of communication research, its failings and the emergence of alternative paths, that I constructed *as a story*. It began with familiar but simple-minded accounts of how messages drive humans into compliance. But in its unfolding it is obvious that this simple beginning *contradicts the very experience of constructing, communicating, and listening to (or reading) it*. Here, our story confronts its own reality, which resides in its present telling. It suggests that the reality we sought to approximate by our scientific accounts always was *of our own making*, and it now calls on us to bring into focus the very communication practices we use in inquiring and writing about communication.

To me, this realization marks a bifurcation point for communication research. I don't anticipate that message-driven communication research will disappear. People in positions of authority are all too eager to embrace deterministic reality constructions that can offer them the prospect of forcing predictability and controllability onto others. Witness the use of message-driven vocabulary in the mass media, politics, education, advertising, public relations, and management. Communication researchers can withdraw into this comfortable niche where message-driven explanations are enforced and the handmaidens of manipulatory interests are rewarded. This would surely be the end of our story.

Becoming aware of the reality in telling our story of communication is a way of getting out of the trap of message-driven explanations. But it also means accepting the notion that reality is a social invention. Surely, we could not otherwise explain the experience that *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be* (Anderson, 1990) and how our constructions of communication could be evolving, as they do, in the very process of inquiring and communicating about them. The revolution that this new understanding of reality can set in motion could be of a Copernican magnitude. However, while Copernicus's theory challenged only the location of the center of the then known astronomical universe and left the hierarchical organization of social and religious life and the objectivist construction of the universe pretty much intact, the epistemology of this new constructivism challenges the privileged role of disembodied knowledge and reveals its complicity in the emergence of hierarchical forms of social and political authority and its attendant requirement of submission.

Constructability of and in a Virtuous Future

I am suggesting that the strands of scholarship mentioned above could be woven into a radically *new and virtuous synthesis*, seeing humans first as cognitively autonomous beings; second, as reflexive practitioners of communication with others (and this includes social scientists in the process of their inquiries); and third, as morally responsible interveners in, if not creators of, the very social realities in which they end up living. To embrace this new epistemology, let me end this essay by suggesting that

communication scholars recognize the social constructibility of reality, with all of its consequences, and make commitments on each of these three points.

First, the commitment to respect the *cognitive autonomy* of those observed and theorized. This presupposes the recognition that language, communication, indeed all *social phenomena* exist only in the knowledge their participants have of them. Specifically, there can be no scientific or everyday understanding of human communication without an understanding of the understanding of those involved in communication. Storytellers can attest to this. Scientists know it when writing for their peers. I am merely suggesting that we grant those we seek to theorize like abilities of understanding. In contrast, message-driven explanations equate scientists' understanding with objective truth and therefore cannot respect others' understanding of communication, unless they all agree. Nor can they acknowledge that anyone's understanding of communication is reflexively embedded in communicating about it. *Cognitive autonomy* resides in the (my) fact that (a) individuals cannot be forced or caused to understand something as intended, as it exists, or as it should be; (b) that nobody can directly observe someone else's understanding; (c) that all individual actions are dedicated to preserve individual understanding, and (d) that understanding is never final, even in the absence of external stimulation.

Respecting this autonomy *prevents abstract and disembodied communication theory constructions* and encourages explanations of communication phenomena (and of other social constructions) from the bottom up, from the knowledge and practices *embodied in its participants*. This contrasts with top-down explanations that attribute determining forces to someone else's (usually the observing scientists') super-individual constructions—for example, ideologies, hegemonic forces, cultural determinisms, rules, or objective meanings. Respecting this autonomy also means *abandoning the idea of creating general theories without obtaining, as far as possible, the consent of those theorized*. If people do hold different theories of communication and practice them with each other, a general theory of communication may not do justice to either. Indeed, there are plenty of eminently practical folk theories people live by—for instance, communication as imparting knowledge, as maintaining or creating relationships, as domination or control, as healing wounds, as dance, and so forth. For inquiries in communication, I prefer a conversation metaphor because it respects the cognitive autonomy of others (Krippendorff, in press, a).

Second, communication scholars should commit themselves to *reflexive theory constructions* by means of which they can enter others' understanding into their own understanding. As understanding is never finished, this means that a reflexive reality cannot remain fixed either. It is continually created, tried out and tested each time it is being talked about. This is so for social scientists, whose analytical categories, origi-

nally invented for mere analytical purposes, can become real (Giddens, 1991, pp. 40–41); for politicians, whose campaign promises can change political practices; for engineers, whose inventions keep technology on the move; and so it is in the everyday life of communication. All social theories must also be communicable, at least among scientific peers, and may reach and affect those theorized therein. Neither can they escape the self-reference this entails, nor can their stability be assured in being communicated. Denying the reflexive nature of human communication (theory) sets communication researchers apart from their subjects and creates reality constructions that aid technologies and can support oppressive social structures. Reflexivity is perhaps the most outstanding feature of human communication. I have proposed (Krippendorff, in press, b) that human communication scholarship redefine itself in terms of the discourse that embraces itself.

Third, we need a commitment to what one might call *a distributive ethics* for social inquiry. In the preceding, I claimed that knowledge, especially social scientific knowledge—communication theory, for example—can hardly be prevented from entering the phenomena it addresses. Whether it is intended to be critical or merely descriptive, it can delegitimize what exists or contribute new social constructions. The changes thus brought forth encourage the emergence of radically distributed realities, a multiverse of reflexive constructions, that no general theory can capture. I believe that the increased awareness of our role in the socially (and hence communicationally) constructed, distributed, and emerging nature of contemporary realities has brought us, as social scientists, to a point where truth is secondary to the responsibilities we bear for our constructions. To be consistent with this new multiverse means to distribute this responsibility. I made the methodological proposal to invite those affected to participate in the construction of communication theories concerning them (Krippendorff, in press, a). Living such an ethics may not be easy. However, practical difficulties should not deter us from developing methodologies that assure respect for those theorized.

No story of our message-driven past can tell us what the future has in store. But its present telling demonstrates the constructed nature of our field, and the awareness of this demonstration affirms our role in inventing and reconstructing the social realities we work in. If this is so, we might as well take the poetic licence to construct, and put into a story, the most desirable realities we can imagine. Understanding this understanding could be a moment of liberation.

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