

Communication as a Social Process

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At first glance, the title of this essay seems to be more than just a little bit tautological. Obviously, communication is a social process that needs at least one agent, usually called communicator, who acts with regard to another agent, the recipient. In the Encyclopedia Britannica on the internet communication is described as a social behavior and defined as "the exchange of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols". The word communication is derived from the latin verb *communicare* which means to share things or to make things common. All of this makes totally clear that communication is a social process. My argument is, indeed, that we all know this, but tend to ignore this fact in our daily routines as researchers and scholars.

I do not want to argue that there is a complete lack of a sociological perspective on communication. In the different fields of communication research, we will find some rare examples with a developed sociological perspective. All in all, however, these approaches seem to play only a minor role. In my opinion, there are three reasons for that: the organization of research, the limitation of the methods, especially surveys, and the dominance of psychological approaches in the field of reception studies.

The social character of communication processes can be analyzed from two different perspectives. One is the social relation between the two positions in the communication process: the communicator and the recipient. The second perspective focuses on the other relevant social relations of the communicator or the recipient and their influence on the origins or results of communication. When we participate in communication processes, we are not only communicators or recipients. Instead, we are also still members of different social groups and still integrated in a relevant network of social relations.

The most developed perspective in journalism research is a sociological one. Some journalism studies analyze journalistic work as a collaborative effort. Breed [1] analyzed "Social Control in the Newsroom" and the gatekeeper tradition has changed his view from [2] very individualistic perspective to a more organizational or even cybernetic one as [3] pointed out. Some studies also keep in mind that journalists are members of the middle class. In German journalism studies, the dominant paradigm is to view journalism as a social system. The advantage of journalism research could be explained by practical and methodological reasons. First of all, it cannot be ignored that journalists work within an organization and that their work is influenced by this setting. Secondly, it is relatively easy to analyze news organizations. There are written rules and regulations that can be used as empirical material. The relevant social relations are easy to identify. The social interaction takes place within a known time span at a known place. This means that journalistic work in the newsroom can be observed. Interviews, necessarily tending to support an individualistic point of view, can easily be supplemented by other research methods.

There are approaches in audience and media effects research which include social processes. The groundbreaking study of [4] revealed that members of the audience have to be regarded as members of social groups living within important social relations. For example, this study was extremely influential in establishing the opinion leader research. We also find some social aspects in the uses and gratifications approach in which especially social motives seem to be relevant for media use. We

use media to integrate ourselves in social groups and to know what other people are talking about. Still, this is no reason to argue that [5] verdict regarding social blindness of the uses and gratifications research has to be revised. Within media effects studies, the spiral of silence theory and the third-person effect research show some interest in social relations. The lack of social perspectives is related to the used methods which are often based on interview techniques and are therefore focused on the individual. In the field of reception studies, the success of psychological approaches may be another reason.

Some research considers the agents in communication processes to be social beings, but the interaction between journalists and the audiences is difficult to analyze. There are only a few approaches dealing with this question. One is the transactional perspective. Bauer's [6] famous article "The obstinate audience" is perhaps the most influential work in this field. Another, although related, perspective derives from media economic research. To analyze media products as market-driven surely implies that there is at least some kind of relation between journalists and members of the audiences. A superficial review of the research literature published in recent years reveals studies on journalism, media content, media systems, media use and media effects. These fields, however, seem to be relatively detached from each other. Most researchers are specialized in one of these fields. Consequently, the other fields are widely ignored in the argumentation of their papers. That means that we often do research on journalists and ignore the role of the recipients or that we carry out reception or effects studies without keeping journalists in mind. It seems to me that the Lasswell Formula [7] is still the hidden but powerful structuring idea of communication research, although there is a bunch of scientific literature that tells us that this concept has very serious shortfalls. Nevertheless, if we understand ourselves not as communication researchers but as journalism or audience researchers, we will not have the chance to analyze the social relations between journalists and their audiences.

The enduring impact of the Lasswell Formula can be explained by the structure of the traditional mass communication process, because there are no obvious social relations between journalists and the public. New communication media like the World Wide Web and especially the social networks fundamentally change the structure of public communication. They will mediatize social relations. Thus, it becomes more important to include social relations in our theories and research, but it also becomes easier. Nowadays, social relations leave traces in the communicative infrastructure built by the internet. Many of these are open to the public and are therefore open to empirical research.

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This provides us with a huge chance to study the social character of the communication process more efficiently. However, we will only be able to take this chance if we develop both empirical methods as well as relevant theories.

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