

Chapter 2

Who Are You? Why Are You Here? Can I Help You Achieve Your Goals?

In the previous paragraph, I mentioned my students. It is thanks to them and for them that this book was written. I must say straight away that I owe them a debt of gratitude: the confusion I experienced as an old-new researcher in a field that lacks a systematic introduction was dwarfed by my bewilderment as a teacher in that field. For, in the classroom, the practical aspects of this problem were thrown into sharp relief and the challenge that they pose took on an added urgency: how could I be of value to such a varied group of students?

Seated before me in my classroom were: a future journalist and a future sociologist of the web, a future publicist, radio broadcaster, photographer, historian of technology, television anchor, publisher, political spokesperson, conflict resolution expert, advertiser, software engineer, web designer, marketer, management consultant, and even a future poet (even if still unbeknownst to her). The list of potential professions is long and rather open-ended, since we do not know what form media professions of the distant and not-so-distant future will assume. From the academic perspective, communication studies have quickly and surely replaced what was known until recent years as a “general BA”, at least insofar as the same large section of the population consisting of those who seek an academic education but do not yet know what field they wish to study and who twenty years ago would have ended up in the default program of “general humanities” today enroll in communication studies, which are considered the practical general studies of the early twenty-first century (a century that no longer lets the inquisitive student roam freely and marvel at the treasures of human culture without the burden of defined financial objectives and pre-articulated career goals).

And yet, in the past decade there are signs again of changing winds in the behavior of this segment of the population: at least part of the large group of students that until recently had sought out its education in departments of communication studies has begun to move, somewhat uneasily, toward business and management schools, of all things. It is important to recognize that both the massive shift that began some sixty years ago toward communication studies and the shift of more recent years, which is accompanied by a certain sense of a crisis of faith, away from communication studies toward business and management schools, are a distinct symptom of the same sense of lack of direction that concerns us here: the lack of general and clear guidelines for understanding the sum of all phenomena

described as “communication” is the source both of the heightened interest in the discipline and of the intense criticism to which it is subjected. (Whether or not those who throng to business programs are aware of this, the difficulties that brought them to abandon communication studies in favor of business departments rear their heads in those programs just as stubbornly and for the same reasons—because business administration is rather obviously just a minute sub-field of communication studies, at least insofar as it shares the same methodological difficulties and limitations that we will consider here.)

I wish to help the diverse group of students seated before me in class. I note to myself that the cluster of professions in which they hope to train is not as rich and complex as the selection of professions and training backgrounds of the teachers of communication, not to mention the selection that includes everyone worthy in principle, from an abstract and theoretical perspective, of being deemed a communication researcher—that is, anyone studying central aspects of communication-in-all-of-its-forms. What are the professional problems common to all of these areas of expertise? What are the qualifications and professional skills that characterize experts in these professions? Why have they been lumped together? The answers to these questions are not as clear-cut as some teachers in communication studies have become accustomed to telling themselves and their students. For example, it would be hard to find in our classroom a future professional linguist, even though the linguist is undoubtedly a researcher of what is our primary medium of communication—human language. When I suggest this in class, a student raises her hand and asks why the future educator and the future musicologist are also absent from our list of students. She is right, of course. These are indisputably important and central domains of communication. And we could easily go on to expand the list: it also lacks, among many others, the various future artists, who are of course all in the business of communication, as well as translators, philologists... and this, without even venturing into the so-called “harder” sciences. For neither do we normally find in courses that offer an introduction to communication studies the future computer scientist nor the future evolutionary developmental biologist, despite the fact that were there a course that offered a genuinely general introduction to communication, an introduction to communication-in-all-of-its-forms, I have no doubt that the students of these disciplines would take their places at the front of the classroom with an eager and urgent curiosity.

The confusion only increases when we notice the ambiguousness of the name by which the study of communication commonly goes: “media studies”. The literal meaning of this deliberately vague term is “the study of means” (“media” is the Latin plural form of “medium” which means “middle” or “in-between”; a medium, then, is anything that stands in-between things). The literal meaning of the title “media studies”, therefore, is the study of the mediators. Perceptive students will rightfully ask: *which* mediators are referred to by this title? For if everything that stands between two (or more) things is included in our discipline, we will find ourselves seeking a theory of everything that exists... Is it possible to limit our field so as to enable a responsible investigation of certain distinct parts of such a vast

world? What are the forms of media we wish to study, and why? Is their list finite? And if not, is there some sort of criterion we can apply to these forms of media to distinguish those that interest us from those that do not? We seek to study only those media that function as means of communication, of course. So why drop the second half of the noun? Could the reason be that we simply do not know to distinguish a medium of communication from a medium that is not one of communication? Is there a medium that is not simultaneously a means of communication? Here colloquial English serves to cover up a confusion: those who named the field “media studies” appear to have preferred vagueness with respect to the term’s designation, perhaps hoping that its users would somehow fill in the missing criterion. But the confusion does not go away by itself. This is attested by the countless unsuccessful elaborations of the term that can be found in media studies departments across the world and in discussions of media in the literature. One widely used term, for example, is “the technical media”, and there is also “the new media”. These elaborations are useless from a theoretical perspective because there is no medium at all that does not rely on techniques and no medium whose operation does not presuppose a skill (i.e., that is not “*technē*” in the original Greek sense of that word), and also because we would need to know, at least vaguely, what does and does not count as media before we could determine if they are indeed “new” media, as opposed to variations on old media (or maybe, if this is possible, a new phenomenon that is not at all a medium). The confusion, then, remains in tact despite the attempt to conceal it behind pseudo elaborations and groundless distinctions, and the terms that describe the field slip under the radar of those who employ them as if their designation were perfectly clear, as if every intelligent person knows what the media are. Other well-known tags for sub-categories within our field express similar difficulties: for example, “Organizational Communication”, “Social Communication”, “Interpersonal Communication”, “Cultural Communication”, and even the recent “Media Ecology”, among many others. Whether or not we are sympathetic to this illusory solution of brushing the confusion under the dictionary, we should not underestimate the difficulty it attempts to solve: the search for the unique element that unites the many fields grouped under the academic heading of media studies is nearly as tangled and complex as the search for the unique element that unites all the phenomena normally included in the category of communication-in-all-of-its-forms.

Some of the communication studies experts I met over the years seemed to have internalized, perhaps as early as their student years, a set of institutional habits and patterns of thought that allow them to brush aside the doubts I raise here with a confident wave of the hand, or at most a slight rise in intonation designed to drown out undesired questions. The field taught in communication departments, their dismissive explanation goes, is of course not the product of the study of communication-in-all-of-its-forms, if such a study even exists, but merely the product of the study of *mass* media. It is a historical fact that certain technologies, like speech and writing, have shaped the development of humankind, and that some of these technologies, like print and the telegraph, have had a decisive effect upon the evolution of modern society and therefore also on our becoming a multitude, a mass (which is, of course, one of the prominent marks of modernity). Given that a

complicated reciprocal relation holds between the cultural structure of a society (including the various institutions that cradle and establish it) and the psychic structure of its members, a relation that we will later dwell on at considerable length, the goal of mass media (they contend) is simply to understand the psyche of modern individuals by understanding the process of their formation by these communication technologies. The study of mass media, then, according to this view, is the interdisciplinary core of the social sciences: its students seek to familiarize themselves with a range of research areas beginning with the psychology of modern individuals and culminating with the study of the sociology, history, and economics that have shaped them.

This answer is correct as far as it goes. Or else, at least it faithfully describes the theoretical outlook of many departments of media and communication studies. In some respects, it is also historically partially accurate, that is to say, it faithfully captures some of the intentions of the field's founders and in particular of those who came to it from the humanities and the social sciences, like the brilliant economist Harold Innis and the unconventional professor of literature Marshall McLuhan. Yet I think it is important to pause over this answer and note how little it actually does to advance a theoretical introductory discussion of the sort that we are here pursuing: it replaces genuine confusion with an illusory security. After all, in the previous passage we found ourselves talking about the "mass media" and about "communication", while in fact we possess not even the beginning of a distinction that would allow us to identify and understand the meaning of "communication" and of "media". What sets mass media technologies apart from other technologies, including those that can be called mass technologies? Indeed, is there any technology that is not simultaneously a medium? And if not, where does mass communication end and another, more intimate form of communication begin?

In order to clarify this point it is helpful to pause briefly over the working definition provided by McLuhan (who was, incidentally, among the first and most influential thinkers to wield the term "media" in a deliberately loose manner as a characteristic label of the field). *McLuhan famously argued that a medium (a means of communication) is any object, material or theoretical, that we use to enhance a certain aspect of our being.* Take a stone, for example. The stone, argued McLuhan, if properly held, functions as a tougher, stronger fist, or a sharper claw, insofar as the man who picks it up while hunting, warring or working, effectively uses it as an enhancement of his hand. As such, the stone is a means of communication according to McLuhan. For using the stone *reshapes the environment* of the individual who picks it up (it makes it softer, for example) and will consequently eventually *reshape its user*. The users' hands, for example, no longer needing to be as hard as the rock, will soften too. The users' gripping skills will improve, and their brains will have evolved, too, so as to allow this. Moreover: when properly cast at its target, the stone is not just a harder fist but also a longer arm, and in this sense, too, argues McLuhan, it is a medium. For it shrinks the world of reachable objects. Finally, since stones have a much longer lifespan than people, they can be used to express various intentions (for instance, through a stone monument) that will echo for thousands of years after the passing of their creators. Thus, a stone

monument represents a significant enhancement of our ability to deliver thoughts through time and even to enrich future generations with our experiences. Similarly, the automobile is an enhancement of our legs and movement capabilities, as well as of our ability to manifest social success; the library—an enhancement of our memory; the phone—of our voice; the binoculars and microscope—of our eyes; and even the economic system is a more efficient (and under very particular conditions, also more moral) arrangement of our cooperation. These, according to McLuhan, are all (communication) media.

McLuhan further argued that the change effected upon us by every such enhancement is total: it instigates a chain reaction that reshapes our identity by rearranging the relations between the communication means that we comprise. This observation is as trivial as it is profound: by enhancing any one aspect of our being, we simultaneously make certain other aspects redundant and rearrange the interrelations between all aspects. Clearly, the Giraffe's neck could not have grown to its present size without many corresponding changes in its ancestor's structure, brain and behavior patterns. Think, for example, how an extra pair of hands would influence our existence, or what would happen to us if we suddenly acquired eyes in the back of our heads. Such drastic biological changes could of course never occur in us suddenly, out of the blue, because they cannot occur without comprehensive corresponding changes in our brain, our spine, our sense organs, and all the rest. But our artificial enhancements, our discoveries and technologies, do occur quite suddenly. And their effect on us is often nearly as total. Like an extra-pair of eyes, artificial enhancements reshape everything about us, including our physique, our habitats, our psyche and the very structure of our society. Changes almost as radical as this did indeed occur in our ancestors, for example when they acquired the skill to kindle and control fire or when they began communicating by means of a rudimentary language. And recently, such changes are occurring at an ever-accelerating, often terrifying pace. Observing all of this led McLuhan to coin his best-known slogan: "The medium is the message". The changes effected upon us by new media, he argued, far exceed the changes caused directly by their capacity as vehicles of messages. This is true not only with respect to the discovery of literacy: it is true of print, of the telegraph, of the modern car, of the electric bulb, of the internet and the mobile phone, and indeed of every possible technology that we can imagine. Media are created by us, and yet they reshape us, often quite radically and unexpectedly.

McLuhan's insights are fascinating and illuminating. But for the purpose of the present discussion they serve primarily to underscore the confusion of those who, like ourselves, are wandering around a new domain in search of its boundaries or at least of some of its prominent features: not only do these insights fail to help us sketch the outline of what ought and ought not be included in the study of the means of communication, they also clarify how hopeless such an attempt would be in the first place. Ask yourselves whether there is any human technology—from a cotton ear swab or a napkin to the atomic bomb or particle accelerator—that is not a means of communication according to McLuhan's definition. A definition of this sort, therefore, is virtually useless as a tool for circumscribing our field: it

effectively pronounces all actual and theoretical objects as means of communication. Could it be that those who wish to study communication are seeking a general theory of everything?

McLuhan, as it happens, was among the first to recognize the bulimic nature of his own definition, even acknowledging this fact with the kind of palpable amusement that came to be a trademark of his playful writing: he embraced the totality of his new theory with a wink, like a mischievous boy who stumbles upon an endless sandbox covered with toys as far as the eye can see. This is also the reason why he encouraged the use of the vague term “media”: he wanted no boundaries on the study that he had helped to establish. In doing so, he distanced himself from those who regard the search for a general theory of everything as a case of shameless charlatanism (however charming, witty and original its presentation). Suppose, for example, that someone wants to study the history of media. According to McLuhan, what such a person seeks is the story of every technology (actual or theoretical) ever created, and of every kind of impact such technology has had on its users. Such a total history (the term “total history” was coined disparagingly by professional historians to denounce such pretension as ridiculous) is fantastic in the manner of Borges’ endless, absurd library: we cannot even come close to producing its index, even if the whole of humankind applied itself to this task until the end of time. True, certain responsible and cautious scholars, like the abovementioned Harold Innis conducted meticulous studies of the history of certain basic goods (such as fur) within circumscribed geographical areas, as well as of particular technologies (the railroad track, for example) and of some of the ways in which they influenced certain aspects of the evolution of western culture in general and Canadian culture in particular; but without clear and well-argued criteria for selecting his topics, this only means that Innis had a knack for choosing particularly effective and convincing examples that would capture the interest of his readers. The question, however, is not whether we can entertain our readers with interesting discussions of major technologies that have influenced human development, but whether our choice of one technology over another as an object of study is anything more than strictly random, and if so, what is the principle that ought to guide this choice? It is very hard to find convincing answers to these questions in the writings of Innis or McLuhan.

And this is also the reason why focusing on the title “mass media” does not yet duly narrow down the domain of our research. Allow me to elaborate on this with the help of several examples. Consider, for instance, the story of the discovery and mass production of antibiotics—undoubtedly a fascinating chapter in the annals of how we came to be a modern “mass” (no less so than the oft-repeated story of the invention of the home radio). Or consider the all but mythical story of that modern Midas, the brilliant chemist Fritz Haber. Haber taught the world how to synthesize ammonia gas and so how to produce both nitrate-based explosives and chemical fertilizers on an unprecedented scale. He did this in the early twentieth century, when the traditional means for producing fertilizers (primarily saltpeter) were rapidly running out. Many people are not aware of this, but without Haber, human population would not have reached its current size of seven billion: we simply

would not have been able to feed so many mouths. Haber also taught us how to protect the large-scale crops made possible by his chemical fertilizer, by inventing innovative pesticides. Without the chemical fertilizer and the pesticide, the world would not have been able to reach such a troubling scale of overpopulation. The most infamous pesticide invented by Haber, by the way, was Cyclone B, the same gas later used for the mass murder of many of his “fellow” European Jews (Haber was Jewish by descent, but converted to Christianity). Indeed, already during World War I, he was among the pioneers of German chemical warfare. Questions about the wisdom of feeding so many people or the morality of the various inventions introduced by Haber, who was, for better or worse, one of the greatest scientists of his time, are not part of our concern here; my aim is simply to draw attention to the fact that his inventions constitute a central chapter in the story of the processes by which humankind became a “mass” (in the full modern sense of the term, which includes not just our numerical growth as a species but also the mechanization of killing, and the stripping of the human quality from the individual as such).

Trying to move away from Haber’s rather horrifying story, I am reminded of the modest discovery by the tragic physician Ignaz Semmelweis. It, too, is relevant to our transformation into a modern mass: Semmelweis taught doctors how to wash their hands and disinfect their tools before attending to women in labor. Many of these doctors had regularly moved between performing autopsies and treating women in the maternity ward without so much as washing their hands with water and soap (as the role of bacteria in causing infections and the importance of disinfection were not yet known). Our becoming a mass owes a lot to such fundamental improvements in sanitation and to the detection, following this new knowledge, of ways to reduce mortality rates. So can we say that the discoverers of Penicillin and chemical fertilizer or the pioneers of modern sanitation are any less responsible for our becoming a mass than Morse and Diesel, Lumière or Steve Jobs? I do not think we can.

Though I imagine that the point is clear by now, I want to mention one more classic example before we return to our investigation. McLuhan was particularly fond of this example and typically considered its investigation no less integral to the study of “Communication” than the writing of the history of the telegraph and its impact on the development of the United States of America. Its origin is in the works of historian Lynn White (1962), and McLuhan cites it with typical pleasure in his famous book about war, one of his best-known collaborations with the brilliant graphic designer Quentin Fiore.¹ I cannot vouch for its historical credibility, but the example is a good illustration of the challenge that we face here. White argues that the stirrup—that little footrest that first allowed the armored horse rider to maneuver on horseback without falling off from the weight of his armor—arrived in Europe from the East around the eighth century. Arrived—and quickly proceeded to change the course of history. The stirrup, he explains, enabled the first effective use in battle of the armored knight, who became more or less invincible as

¹McLuhan and Fiore (1968), pp. 26–29.

a result. According to White, the cost of maintaining the knight's armor was enormous, indeed unprecedentedly high for the economy of the time, but the results on the battlefield justified even this enormous expense. A king who wished to keep an invincible army, that is, an army of armored knights, thus had to change the social and economic structure of the population of his subjects from the core: he had to replace the mass mobilization of peasants to fight in the war (the common practice at the time, which produced less than dazzling results on the battlefield) with the mobilization of peasants to provide regular financial support for the hefty expenses of a select group of knights, who were at first just simple able-bodied peasants selected from among their peers and equipped with armor funded by them. Each knight represented in battle the mass of peasants he had spared from the fighting. In other words, the peasant-knight released the masses of his fellow villagers of the burden of participating in war at the cost of enslaving them for the rest of their lives as tenant farmers. The revenue from their labor funded the great expenses of the knight's constant equipment repairs. This is precisely what Charlemagne did, according to White: in order to establish an invincible army, he radically altered Europe's socio-economic structure, rendering it feudal for many centuries to come. And all of this, White contends, because of a small footrest brought over from the East....

At this point, the colleagues whom I inquire about the nature of our field tend to lose their patience. Communication technologies (like the telegraph or radio), they argue, trying one last time to set me on the proper path, are distinct from other technologies that are not communication technologies (like chemical fertilizer or the stirrup) insofar as they are *means of transmitting information*. Pure and simple. The fertilizer and the stirrup, then, are not communication technologies because they are not designed to transmit information. In subsequent chapters I will examine this line of argument closely, for I think that it rests on an error of perspective: in particular, it stems from an essentialistic and even an anthropomorphic misconception. But for the moment, I wish only to point out that it contains significant and fascinating problems that are at the very least worthy of our attention. Not many concepts have produced quite as much intellectual blather as the cluster of concepts we hold about information. As we will see later on, there are quite a few such concepts, and they are not compatible with one another.² At the very least, some of these concepts seem to belong to the realm of mathematics and physics, whereas others seem to belong inextricably to the realm of individuals and their environments. Can these realms be united? How? Some experts regard "information" as virtually synonymous with "meaningful content". This view is common among those who regard communication as the transmission of information. For others, however, information is indeed content, but content that has been stripped of many of the features that make it a meaningful entity, with the explicit aim of limiting those features in as much as this is needed, given a certain context or task. However, as we will see later on, in many of these senses, the bacteria that produces penicillin as well as the

²For an interesting list of obviously incompatible definitions see Schement (1993), pp. 20–30.

farmer who treats his crops with pesticide or fertilizes them are also conveyers of information, so that it is doubtful whether we could ever, even after elucidating that problematic set of concepts, manage to draw from our basic working definitions any sort of distinction that would be helpful for us all. Samuel Johnson, the greatest lexicographer in our history and a man who thought deeply about the problems of communication and its reduction to information, once noted that his tobacco box is nothing but a physical object until it is sent, empty, to his tobacco seller.... In order to approach this miraculous emergence of an object's meaning carefully, we need much more than an impatient dismissal of our quandaries. Indeed, even if in our attempt to find a satisfying answer to the question "What is information?" we now went straight to the seminal and most authoritative essay in the history of information theory, by Claude Shannon (the father of mathematical information theory, wrongly called—already by him—"communication theory") and his co-author Warren Weaver, we would immediately come up against a bold assertion that would probably discourage at least some of my colleagues: at the very outset of their essay, *Shannon and Weaver assert that communication is but a general name for any regular influence of one mechanism upon another*. This is almost certainly the source of McLuhan's aforementioned problematic definition, whose loose and open-ended nature caused us difficulty. It is clear, then, that under such a definition, the stirrup, fertilizer, antibiotics, and even hand-washing are all means of communication; they are all media to be reflected upon by the media expert.

When I look out at the classroom, the expressions of my students betray concern. They seem to find my account engaging enough, but the confusion I admit to troubles them. If I go on like this, giving voice to my doubts, I will lose however little of their attention I still hold. Can these students be helped?

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In Search of a Simple Introduction to Communication

Bar-Am, N.

2016, X, 216 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-25623-8