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# Communications as Cultural Science

Raymond Williams

Human communication has been seriously and intensively studied as far back as we have records of organized thought. In western civilization the sciences of grammar and rhetoric were for two millennia at the center of education, and though the names have changed, studies of language and its practical skills have remained central. The study of communications – that significant plural – is by contrast, at least at first sight, a modern phenomenon.

There are two obvious reasons for this altered definition. First, the institutions of communications in modern societies are of a size and importance which give them, inevitably, social and political significance and, increasingly, economic significance as well. Second, there has been the well-known series of technical developments in communication, involving radical changes in the possibilities of transmission and reception and, as significantly, in reproducibility and reproduction. Because of these changes our kinds of attention and study have altered.

Necessarily, then, the communication scientist materializes in many specialized forms. He is a sociologist, concerned with these institutions and their effects. He is an engineer, concerned with these technologies and with the systems which are essential to design, understand and control. He is a cultural analyst, concerned with the meanings and values of particular artifacts and classes of artifact, from poems and paintings to films and newspapers, from buildings to fashions in dress. He is a psychologist, concerned with the basic units and patterns of communicative interaction, face to face (though if we always spoke face to

face, in each other's presence, the problem would be very much simpler) or in the differential use of machines. Or he is a linguist or linguistic philosopher, concerned with the basic forms and structures of the acts of expression and communication.

The problems are so great – and not only great but extraordinarily subtle and intricate – that we ought first, in a general way, to welcome this diversity of emphasis and discipline. But this is rarely how it goes. That communication scientists cannot communicate with each other is by now one of those old jokes which with repetition becomes melancholy.

The situation reminds me of that perhaps apocryphal story of a conference on Latin studies, to be attended by Latin scholars from all over the world. Someone had the plausible notion that they should conduct their proceedings in Latin, but it didn't work. What they had in common as their subject was in practice less than the linguistic history that divided them. Some, I am sure, felt a kind of despair that there should have been this drifting apart. Others, I am also sure, went home and mocked those extraordinary others who said 'veer' or 'wire' or similar incomprehensible jargon for *vir*. But some at least, I would hope, came to reflect on their situation with some sense of the history which simultaneously united and divided them: the common interest and the divergent habits; and the need, as in all communication, to listen as well as to state and assert.

That is as much as can be done, in the short term. In Britain especially the waters of higher education are just now unusually brackish. You can go on doing, in effect without challenge, virtually anything that has ever been done, but if you propose anything new you are lucky if your integrity escapes whipping; your intelligence and sensibility will have been long given up as dead. For suppose you said, 'There are these different kinds of communication studies; shall we try, in some form – in a department, in a colloquium, in an interdisciplinary programme, to put them physically if in no other way in contact for say the next five years, and see if we learn anything?' – not only would you have committed an error of taste and judgement but you would find, rising from the ground like armed men or armed ghosts, tame literary scholars insisting on the paramount importance of keeping out sociology, tame sociologists saying the same thing the other way round – and to hear the curled



sneer that can be got into 'sociology' or 'literary' is one of the communication experiences of our times. Fortunately, however, not all men, not even all scholars, are tame. Under whatever difficulties, the work will have to be done and is in some places being attempted.

The approach I want to describe is that of cultural studies, which is English for 'cultural science.' Here, centrally, communication is a practice. Communication study is open to whatever can be learned of the basis of this practice: the detailed processes of language and of gesture, in expression and interaction, and of course any general features of underlying human structures and conventions. It is open, also, to the effects on these processes and features of particular technologies which, since it is a modern study, it necessarily considers over a range from the printed book and the photograph to broadcasting and motion pictures and beyond these to the specialized electronic media.

Within a living culture, so many of these processes will have been naturalized, and those which have not will have been identified as conscious and isolable modernisms, that without this dimension of openness to the fundamental processes much of the working analysis will be naive, or will at best be limited to the unexamined conventions of its culture. Nevertheless, cultural study is concerned with practice. It draws to it a proportion – now markedly increasing – of those students whose received discipline is the understanding of cultural artifacts.

Over many centuries, ways have been found of talking to the point, though in varying and usually controversial ways, about poems, paintings, buildings, songs, novels, films, symphonies, newspapers, advertisements, political speeches, styles of dress; a whole range of cultural practice which may be separated as artifacts for more specific study, but which have also to be seen as the practical communication – or, more strictly, that special part of it which has survived because it is in some way recorded – of a particular people or class of a people at a particular place and time.

Many of the disciplines which deal with these artifacts are remarkably developed in their own terms, and in an academic context can separate out from each other and from that more

central perception that they were made by real men in real places in real and significant social relationships. More crucially, in their concentration on artifacts, the disciplines, especially as they develop in scholarly and historical ways, can convert all practices to artifacts, and in the shadow of this delusion suppose themselves absolved, in the name of the excellence and achievement of the past, from the comparable practices of their own time.

It is then not only, to take an example, that in the study of literature at Oxford there was for many years a classical time-stop at 1830, since the practice of our great-great-grandfathers and their embarrassingly pressing descendants was altogether too turbulent and uncertain; or that in the study of the history of the English language at Cambridge there is in effect a time-stop at the point in the late middle ages when the language became that which we now write and speak and keep changing. It is also that a practice has to become an artifact, and moreover an artifact of the kind that is conventionally found in libraries and museums, to deserve much attention. A seventeenth-century political pamphlet deserves disciplined attention; a current party political broadcast does not.

There is, then, a resistance, in the name of standards, to a very wide area of contemporary cultural practice; but moreover, from the habits of mind thus induced (the conversion of practices into artifacts, of real expressive and communicative process into isolable objects) several modes of analysis which depend on the recognition of practice – the reconstruction of composition, the study of social relations within which the practice occurred, the study of related practices which lead to distinguishable artifacts but which are still related – all these and other modes become attenuated or unattempted and the discipline narrows, losing its touch with life.

We say cultural studies because we are concerned with practice and with the relations between practices. Culture itself was originally a practice: the growth and tending of wheat or the growth and tending of minds. The significance of the emergence of the modern meaning of culture – that meaning which took it beyond specific cultural practices to a general process or state – is that the individual practices were seen as related parts of a general development or achievement. Culture became, in



the eighteenth century, an idea which expressed a secular sense of general human development, and its advance, in this respect, over metaphysical notions of a providential or aberrant civilization is remarkable.

But almost at once it encountered the central problem of all subsequent cultural theory: that of the relations between different practices, within what was nevertheless seen as a general development. The first form of this difficulty was the use of culture to indicate all general human development – in the popular form of the universal histories, which recounted the growth of civilization – and the alternative and almost contemporary use of the same term, 'culture,' to indicate the specific development of a particular people, a national culture.

This difficulty has persisted, and is still of radical theoretical importance in anthropology and in history. But the next phase of difficulty was even harder. In idealist thought it had been assumed that the guiding element in this general cultural process was spirit or consciousness (although in its later forms this was a human and not a divine spirit). Marx challenged that by naming the guiding element – even, in language he inherited, the determining element – as material production and the social relations it embodies. That theoretical conflict is also, still, of profound importance. In our own immediate terms, it underlies all questions about the relations between practices, and unless these questions are faced, no studies of communications can get very far.

Out of this argument, about the relation between practices, came the new concept of cultural science and with it a significant part of modern sociology. Dilthey, for example, was concerned to distinguish between the natural and cultural sciences, in respect of their fields of research, their forms of experience, and the role of the attitudes of the investigator. His distinctions, I believe, are still fundamental, though they leave many problems unsolved.

Weber, even more extensively, was persistently concerned with the relations between fundamental social and cultural practices, and his hypothesis of elective affinities – at times in the more modern guise of 'correspondences' and 'homologous structures' – has proved an attractive halfway house in cultural analysis; halfway, or so it seems, between simple idealist theories

and the simpler kinds of materialist determinism.

Now the spirit of this whole inquiry – to which literally thousands of people have contributed – is profoundly open, alert, and general. It has had its bitter and even its squalid controversies, and this is understandable; but in temper and approach it is in a wholly different dimension from what seems our own world of small cultivators, heads down to their own fields; or if they have their heads down, good luck to them, for some at least are much busier at the walls and fences, erecting improbable signs that trespassers will be prosecuted, or exploiting the natural desire of young men and women to be qualified and certificated by a self-interested definition of the discipline and its boundaries.

I recall the spirit of cultural science because I am interested in its heirs – who will change its methods but will still inherit its vigorous and general humanity. If I speak with some feeling it is because until quite recently opportunities were missed here in Britain – in a country which has a very rich tradition of just this kind – for the effective reconstitution of cultural studies, within which, as I am arguing, a central kind of communications study should be pursued.

The opportunities were missed, largely, because of a demarcation dispute. People coming to communications analysis from the tradition of cultural studies were looked up and down and eventually identified as literary types. Some part of this error was explicable. Literary study itself, for the reasons I gave earlier, had been in some places reduced to the specialized analysis of isolated artifacts. Indeed there has been a critical culmination of a long process of narrowing-down. Literature itself, as a concept, was a Renaissance specialization from the more general area of discourse in writing and speech: a specialization directly related to the printed book. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there was a further specialization: literature, which had till then included all forms of writing, came to be specialized, though with some exceptions and overlaps, to imaginative literature. (The theoretical complications of that limitation are only just beginning to be grasped.) As modern literary study entered the universities there was a further specialization; literature was the 'good' or 'serious' part of such work.



So the natural area of interest of this kind of person – an interest in all discourse in writing or speech – had been specialized and even restricted to printed imaginative compositions of a certain quality. Of course, when people looked around, most of these had been written in the past. Today – it was said – there was only television and all that rubbish, so that literature, in some places, came to resemble that proverbial bird which flew in ever-decreasing circles until it finally and fundamentally disappeared.

Now this definition of a discipline had undoubtedly made some of its disciples strange. It was no wonder they got looked at. But who was doing the looking? I remember a friend of mine being rebuked for having attempted some cultural analysis on the grounds that this was wanton and ignorant trespass into sociology, by the practitioners of a discipline which in this country at that time had produced not a single piece of cultural analysis of its own and indeed showed no signs of wanting to try.

There was a central area of overlap – more or less adequately recognized and negotiated – between these varying cultural studies and the specifically aesthetic or specifically social studies which lay in either direction. What the practice of aesthetic analysis contributed was a capacity for sustained and detailed analysis of actual cultural works. What was much more open to question was the extension of this kind of analysis and insight to matters of cultural and social generalization where, quite properly, there were other real disciplines to act as a check, or, better, as an incentive. The study of cultural institutions or of cultural effects could not properly be pursued by projected aesthetic analysis.

Yet for a generation this problem was masked by a notion which, as it happened, was widely shared by those who had approached modern communications from what was called 'high culture' and by orthodox social and political scientists. This notion – an ideology if ever there was one – was that of a 'mass society,' based on deep social, cultural and political assumptions and experiences.

And so it came about that the study of communications was deeply and almost disastrously deformed by being confidently named as the study of 'mass-communications'. 'Mass-

communications' is a term which seems to have got into every language and into the most diverse schools, which describes and too often predicts departments and research programs and conferences, and which it is time to bury. Not only is it disastrous in its limitation of communication studies to a few specialized areas like broadcasting and the cinema and what it miscalls popular literature, when there is the whole common area of discourse in speech and writing that always needs to be considered. It is also disastrous in its consequent definition of the 'mass media'. The 'mass' metaphor overtook us in its weakest meaning, of the large ultimate audience, and then positively prevented the analysis of most specific modern communication situations and of most specific modern communication conventions and forms.

But it had one lingering effect. If most people are masses, they are inherently stupid, unstable, easily influenced. Sex and violence not only rear but propagate their ugly heads. The only question worth asking, it seemed, about jazz or television or cinema or even football (for a while they left out politics) was first how, then whether, it corrupted people. The residual result is that it is still easier to get resources for impact-studies – perhaps we should call them corruption-studies – in television and the like than for any other single kind of work. Much of what is then called the sociology of communications is this kind of impact-study, and indeed some of it is valuable, though it is always necessary to add, as everyone trained in really precise observation of behaviour will confirm, that the scientific discovery and demonstration of effects is one of the toughest areas you can enter.

For, again, there is corruption and corruption. I would like to see a system of parallel grants: for every inquiry into the consumption of television or the like, equal resources for an inquiry into production. The great or at least large institutions of modern communications need intensive and continuous study. This has so far been done only in part-time and occasional ways. And I should add while I am saying this that it seems to me very significant that the most detailed information that exists in Britain about reading habits, and some associated behavior, is in the regular and highly specific surveys and reports of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising: a highly intentional



form of research, to say the least, but one which puts any comparable scholarly work in this country to shame.

Studies of institutions, in the full sense – of the productive institutions, of their audiences, and of the forms of relationship between them – will have to be carried out by procedures of social science from which, in result and by example, all cultural analysts will learn a great deal. Indeed in this respect the orthodox suspicion of cultural studies can be seen as justified, and it can only be overcome, from both sides, by practical work. But, of course, this kind of study does not exhaust cultural analysis, or leave it merely to describe, to analyze, and to generalize particular works. Detailed aesthetic analysis tends to be continued and extended. But the real questions arise when we come to forms. Questions about forms in communications are also questions about institutions and about the organization of social relationships. Let me give an example.

When I first started reading social and political science, at about the time when I was getting interested in communications, I came across a formula which I was told was standard for communication sciences: 'Who says what how to whom with what effect?' I was reasonably impressed, after some of my literary studies. That there was a 'who' and a 'whom' as well as a 'what' seemed encouraging, and 'effect,' of course, we were all talking about anyway. But as I went on, I noticed what might be call... a diminution of the 'what': a problem that arises, incidentally, in many communication studies, where the relationship – the 'who' and the 'whom' that communication postulates – can come to override the full substance of the communication, though the relationship and the substance must be seen as in fact inseparable.

To anyone with literary experience, the 'what' is irreducible, as well as active, and needs precise attention as a way of understanding the 'who' and the 'whom' in their most significant senses, and certainly as a way of understanding 'effect'. And I suppose it was this that led me to noticing the formula's most extraordinary omission: 'Who says what how to whom with what effect' – but 'with what purpose?' Nobody seemed to be mentioning or inquiring into that. I know now that this exclusion of *intention* was characteristic of a whole phase of

functionalist social theory, in communications as in much else. But I noticed the exclusion first because I knew nobody could answer questions about the 'what' or give reality and specificity to the variables abstracted as 'who' and 'whom', or speak in other than unconsciously manipulative ways about 'effect', unless intention – not necessarily conscious intention, but the intention informed in the 'what', the shaping intention, the active composition of what is always more than an object – the practice of communication – was seriously and continuously investigated. So I amended the formula, in a paper in a social-scientific journal; but the amendment would have happened anyway, for new people were coming and new frontiers were being crossed.

There is a sense that we are only beginning. It is in this spirit that I offer my example of what communication study involves. It occurred to me recently that the television discussion – the sort of thing we see in Britain on *Panorama* or *Midweek* or *Nationwide* – is now the principal medium of formal social and political argument for the majority of our people. Now I know, as I say that, that the old high-cultural reflex is waiting – I wonder how many of you experienced it: something along the lines of – 'Then God help us!'

But I don't feel it like that, if only because I'm glad that so many people now have at least that minimal access to general discussion. I don't, that is to say, write it off as beneath investigation; on the contrary, even when I agree about its limits and its faults, I see the case for investigation. And how this investigation would be done seems to be to set the task, by example, for communication studies.

First, there is a necessary approach through social and political science. Even highly educated people know comparatively little about the precise social structures within which such discussions are arranged – I mean the formal research, editing, and production relationships; the departmental relationships within the broadcasting institutions; the structures of those institutions and their relations with others. There is this factual description and analysis and social questions arising from it: the critical comparison of models of institutions, models of audiences, and models of representative viewpoints, to take only these obvious examples.



And with these we begin to enter an area where conscious and unconscious models would have to be analyzed and distinguished. Take the model of an active chairman, for example, and the wealth of questions around his role in this precise situation: questions that could be approached, among other ways, by analyzing the notions of presentation and introduction, of chairing and interviewing, or the older notions of mediator and moderator.

Some of these could be tackled with known tools of social analysis; others would require a different dimension of analysis. Someone trained in the analysis of language would in any case have much to contribute: descriptively, as with someone noting and analyzing the conscious politics; critically, to attend to the forms of the discourse – the diction and imagery but also the basic strategies of address, the encounters and evasions, the mode of question and answer and rhetorical question and non-answer: for all of which, if we would use them, we have very serviceable tools.

We would need someone sensitized to dramatic analysis: to the significance of physical groupings, to take only one example, and to the modulation of these by the specific television environment both internally, within the studio, and in quite different ways in the transmitted version (whether edited or live); a recognition of the significance of viewpoint, close-up, variation of angle, cutting – a technical yet central kind of analysis of the precise communication situation.

We would need an understanding of the positive requirements of the technology and the overlapping but not identical version of those requirements adopted by the professionals now using it. For very close work we would need the techniques developed by experimental psychologists for precise analysis of verbal and nonverbal interaction; indeed, their combination with dramatic and cinematic analysis would be extraordinarily instructive. And we would have to go on to include the other part of the communication situation – the viewers: not only studying persistent effects and influences but recording and discussing them in more precise ways while the process is still alive.

We can describe all these methods serially, but most of the really interesting questions would only arise when we came to

put the findings together or, more likely, to push each other's findings around: around the proposition, for example, that the television discussion is not only a political event but also a cultural form, and that the form indicates many overt and covert relationships.

The work will be done because I think there are now enough of us who want to work in these ways to survive the defenses of vested interests, the general drizzle of discouragement, and even the more deeply-rooted inertia of contemporary orthodox culture; to announce in effect an open conspiracy: that in new ways, by trial and error but always openly and publicly, we shall do this work because it needs to be done.

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# Popular Culture: A Sociological Approach

Zev Barbu

Considering the present state of sociological theory in general it would be somewhat disingenuous to begin by apologizing for the highly circumspect and tentative manner in which I intend to approach the subject matter of this paper. It is nonetheless necessary to emphasize from the very outset that lack of a coherent theoretical framework constitutes only part of my difficulty. To follow a Durkheimian manner of approach, one can say that the sociology of popular culture has not yet fulfilled the first two basic requirements of any systematic enquiry, a clear definition and a comprehensive classification. Not only is there an alarmingly wide range of 'operational' definitions, but the very meaning of the term 'popular' differs so greatly from author to author, from context to context, indeed from language to language, that no amount of sociological imagination is great enough to construct a complete picture. Particularly alarming is the tendency noticed in many recent works in the field, to confine the phenomenon of popular culture to its most recent version, namely popular culture in advanced industrial societies, and consequently, to apply to it interpretative models and analytical tools relevant for this and for no other type of society. Whatever its initial justification might have been, it has by now become sufficiently clear that this type of approach is inadequate in a two-fold way: first, it tends to overemphasize those aspects of popular culture which are amenable to an empirical type of enquiry; second, it has, in the long run, prepared the ground for a purely negative, moreover 'subversive', conception of the phenomenon, a