

# WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Jan Sleutels\*

Every company and every organization today, in every branch of trade and in every line of business, is aware of the need for communication, both internal with and between employees, and external with suppliers and customers. With a growing demand, the consultancy market for business communication has grown explosively over the past ten or fifteen years. The same is true of providers of communication facilities: the market for telephone contracts, buzzers, fax machines, mobile phones, email, and Internet, but also traveling facilities, lease cars, secretary services, and so on.

Moreover, also the general public is now craving communication, having caught up with the universal desire to be reachable, to be part of the network, to be able to communicate, to get and to dispatch information, twenty-four hours a day, through as many media as possible. Modern society, it is said, is turning into an information society. And communication is the exchange of information.

Why ask a philosopher about communication? Although it is not up to me to answer that question, there is one remark that may be useful as an epitome of my argument. Philosophers have an unusual nose for the obvious. This may seem trite and pointless. But consider: things that are everywhere, are hard to see. Things that are nearest to us, are often least understood. You don't see what you sit on. Philosophers are trained in questioning the seemingly obvious, the apparently unquestionable. In normal everyday life, the obvious and the common are rarely questioned. It is only in the long run that the obvious becomes dubious, then changes, before finally disappearing and making place for new sets of assumptions. Philosophy may be able to help anticipate such changes, or to prompt and promote them.

## *A management maxim*

It is a management maxim, these days, that communication is the root of success. In this maxim, communication is usually understood as a successful exchange of information, as

\* Paper presented at the annual euroActiv/Agfa meeting, Budapest, Nov. 26, 1999. Dr J.J.M. Sleutels, Faculty of Philosophy, Leiden University, P.O. Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, Netherlands. *Email:* jan@sleutels.com

a 'sender-receiver' sort of thing. It is irrelevant whether this exchange of information takes place between divisions, departments, units, and persons, between companies and suppliers, or between sales and the market. It is all essentially the same thing: a message being conveyed from A to B, information being passed through a channel or a pipeline.

Communication is considered successful if B gets to understand what A means, or if B gets to know what A already knows. Conversely, there are roughly three ways in which communication can fail or break down, namely:

- A may be unable to frame the message,
- B may be unable to decode the message, or to read the information,
- or the medium chosen for the exchange between A and B may be unsuitable for transmitting that particular sort of information.

I am going to take the management maxim about communication as a simple truth: communication lies at the root of success. But I want to suggest that the notion of communication used in it is better understood in a different way. My suggestion will not be new to you. I want to teach you what you know.

### *A natural history of communication*

For us, people of the late twentieth century, communication is first and foremost successful transmission of information. But where did that idea come from and what exactly does it mean? What does it *earn* us? What does it *commit* us to?

The concepts of communication and information are not new. They go back as far as late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Also the idea that to communicate is to pass on information, in the sense of furnishing someone else with knowledge, goes back many centuries. Even in English, according to Hoad's *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, the recorded use of communication in that sense goes back at least as far as the fourteenth century.

Now, communication and information in their 'modern' meaning may be fairly old, but until recently *that* meaning was not the *only* one, nor was it the *primary* meaning. Until, say, the beginning of the 20th century, the modern meaning was imbued with a more fundamental idea: communication as sharing, participating, as communion or community.

In that more primary sense, communication rests on the idea of a common identity that can be shared or participated in by individuals.

If you'll forgive me a theological aside, which some of you may be familiar with, it is interesting to note that what is probably the most authentic use of the term 'communication' has survived in the Catholic Church. To communicate, in that context, means first and foremost to share in, or to administer, Holy Communion. Similarly, 'excommunication', as you will all be aware, refers to an expulsion from the Church community. As a more obscure example, I may mention that the so-called 'communication in holy things' (*communicatio in sacris*) is the participation of Catholics in religious acts of non-Catholics (which has long been forbidden, and perhaps still is, strictly speaking).

Finally, when St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), one of the leading scholars of the Western world, spoke of the *communicatio Dei*, (the communication with God), what he had in mind was not a special type of information exchange with a privileged pipeline to God, an open channel between the mystic and his Maker. Rather, Aquinas was referring to a participation involving opening oneself up to God. In the Western world, also outside the context of Christianity, this particular use of communication has survived for hundreds of years, at least until well into the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

There is some irony in the fact that 'old-fashioned' communication now often tends to amuse us in a more or less condescending way. We tend to feel historically superior. "Gee, clever thought, but hopelessly outdated! Thank God we know better now!" But do we? "Thank science for giving us a clearer and less fishy notion of communication and information." But is our notion more clear than these allegedly 'old-fashioned' ones? I think not. As a matter of fact, I think the situation has become even worse! For the pipeline notion of communication is based on the old-fashioned idea of communication as shared identity, or community, and it is probably incomprehensible, maybe even worthless, without it. How could this happen?

In a nutshell, the story is as follows. Almost twenty-five hundred years ago, a Greek philosopher named Aristotle laid down a theory of the world, a universal metaphysics. He did not invent it single-handedly. More likely, he was just the first to put into writing what

<sup>1</sup> For example, also the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), famous as a source of inspiration for the existentialist movement in our century, spoke of communication with God as a participation involving opening up to God.

was the common sense and general idea of his day. Through his writings, however, Aristotle's theory was of tremendous importance for the development of Western thought. One of its most striking parts is the doctrine of matter and form, the so-called theory of *hylomorphism*. That theory made its way into every branch of learning, where it still resides today, even though we are seldom aware of it, and if we are, we are prone to deny it officially.

Now, Aristotle's theory of the world also included a theory of communication,<sup>2</sup> which was really just the general theory applied to a special problem. Our modern pipeline view of communication goes back on that Aristotelian view. Ironically, however, we usually forget the larger theory of which it is an application. So what we end up with is a view of communication and information that comes dangerously close to being empty. It's like having a car, but no roads to drive on. Or, like proudly holding the steering wheel, while denying the existence of petrol.

#### *Aristotle on communication and information*

Let me not dwell on Aristotle's life. As the German philosopher Martin Heidegger once put it in his lectures on the Greek philosopher: the man was born, he worked, and then died.<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle saw the world as a giant puzzle, as a do-it-yourself assembly kit. You just have to figure out the different components, work out how they fit together, and that explains the world. Now, according to Aristotle, there are really only *two* components, or two *sorts* of components: matter and form. Everything that *is* can be pinned down to a specific combination of these two. For instance, this paper is white. Why? Because it has the white-form. Other things can also have that form, such as a white wall, or a white table. The same form is then received into different matter. It is as simple as that.

Thus, Aristotle solved the problem of how different things can be the same. Take two chairs, for instance, such as the ones you are sitting on now. They are different things, yet they are also somehow the same. They are identical, we often say. Why is that, and what do we mean by it? They are identical in that they resemble one another. But what is resemblance? It is having the same form, being identical in form. One and the same form

<sup>2</sup> Avant-la-lettre, of course. Notice that communication is not a Greek word. In classical Greek, the word that comes closest is *metechein*, which means 'to participate' or 'to share in'.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle (384-322), native of Asia Minor (now Turkey), teacher of Alexander the Great.

is applied in different chunks of matter, is embodied in different stuff. Matter is what makes things different, form is what makes them the same. Matter is what makes them individual, form is what makes them universal. And all things are a mix of matter and form, with the only exception of God, the Great Being, who is pure form, which is why there can be only one of him. (In Christian and Islamic thought, the angels were treated along the same lines.)

Let me move on to an example that is only slightly more complex: Aristotle's solution to the riddle of life. What makes it the case that some things in Nature are alive, while other things are not? Some things (namely, plants, animals, and humans) have bodies *and* are alive, some things have bodies and have a capacity for life, without actually being alive (things that used to be alive), while all other things (elements and minerals only have bodies but neither actual nor possible life. What makes the difference? Aristotle's answer is: a special sort of form, the life-form (Greek: *psyche*, Latin: *anima*).<sup>4</sup> Three such forms can be distinguished: the vegetive form (responsible for nutrition, growth, and reproduction), the sensitive form (responsible for perception and motion), and the rational form (responsible for thinking and willing). In living things, these forms can be stacked on top of each other, such that the higher forms makes use of the lower forms: human beings have all three forms, animals have two, while plants have only one.

Notice that we still endorse this 'primitive biology' today, even though we are rarely aware of it. Think of a situation in which a man loses his mind, as we say. What he loses, is the rational form. What he ends up with, is being "no better than the brutes", as the phrase goes. It may also happen that a man not only loses his mind, but also his capacity for motion and perception. Think of coma patients. As we say, these patients are "reduced to a vegetive existence". They have become "plants". Why do we say these things? Because Aristotle taught us the biology of losing one's mind.

As a final example, let me take Aristotle's theory of communication. In a book called 'On Interpretation' (Greek: *Peri hermeneias*, Latin: *De interpretatione*), Aristotle outlined a theory of perception and of communication that, again, was simply hylemorphism applied to a special problem.<sup>5</sup> How do things get meaning, Aristotle asked. Where does meaning

<sup>4</sup> Notice that 'psyche' did not originally mean 'mind', 'soul' or 'spirit' in our sense of these words. Nor did 'anima' mean 'soul'. The original meaning of 'anima' survives today in 'animation movies' and 'animated conversations'.

<sup>5</sup> An early commentator of his work, the Roman scholar, Christian philosopher and statesman

come from, and how does it get there? He first considered words written on paper. What do they stand for? For the words as pronounced, the words spoken out loud. Now, different people have different ways of pronouncing the same word, so the relation between writing and speech must be conventional. It must be a cultural affair. But what do spoken words stand for in their turn? They stand for the thoughts which they express. Again, different people in different languages express the same thought in different ways. Hence, the relation between thought and speech must be conventional, too. But what do thoughts stand for? Here we reach the final link in the chain of meaning. Thoughts relate to things and their properties. But how do they do that? If you think of an apple, for instance, what makes your thought *about* the apple? Is it a conventional relation, like the other two? Aristotle did not think so: all human beings respond to the same things in (more or less) the same way. Perception is a *natural* process, not a conventional one.

Thoughts, perceptions, ideas, Aristotle explains, are simply special *forms* received by the mind, or rather by the organs of the mind. These forms are literally *received* from the things outside. When you look at a white table, for instance, your eye literally takes on the form of that table: the white-form and the table-form. These forms, or *species* as they were later called, are literally transmitted, continuously and in all directions, through the suitable medium (in this case, the light).

So, if you think of an apple, what makes your thought *about* the apple? Simply the fact that it has the *form* of an apple. The apple has literally *in-form-ed* us, that is, it has given us its very form. This is the basis of our concept of information. It is the theory of similitude or likeness or formal identity: forms that can be shared by things, persons, and ideas.

Now, if you want to communicate with another person, on this model, what you need to do is to *in-form* the other. Successful communication is *identity* between communicators, it is their coming to share a form. In spoken and written communication, we'll first

Boethius (ca. 480-ca. 524/6), translated some of Aristotle's works into Latin, thereby defining for posterity the traditional terms in which Aristotle was to be discussed. Boethius ended his career as a 'prime minister' (magister officiorum, i.e., head of all the government and court services) under King Theodoric the Great, who had him executed on charges of high treason. (During his years in prison, he wrote his beautiful masterpiece, *The Consolation of Philosophy*.) In the early Middle Ages, Boethius was venerated as saint and martyr, but I am not sure whether he still is.

have to push that common form through a pipeline of conventions, as we have seen. The sender encodes his message in a suitable language, sends it through to the receiver, who subsequently decodes it, and in a relevant sense identifies himself with the sender. Notice that, if this form of communication is to be successful, also the language must be something that is shared between sender and receiver. How? That is again explained in terms of matter and form!

### *Two notions of communication*

The 'sender-receiver' model, or the 'pipeline' view, as I have also been calling it, is in fact only a secondary detail of the *real* model of communication: that of shared identity, or community between people (and even, in a sense, between people and things, and between things among themselves). Similarly, information as chunks and bits that pass through the pipeline (words, texts, memos, figures, charts, data), is only a derivative idea. It is only the tip of the iceberg. The tail of a cow, not the animal itself. It is not what *wags* the tail, only what keeps the flies away. It is simply not what *counts*.

But what really counts, is something we seem to have lost sight of. Or at best it is something we take for granted, most of the time: that the vital nerve of communication is shared identity, belonging to a community, a shared *sense* of unity, a common approach and outlook, shared interests, goals and targets. That idea forms the root and foundation of every successful community, company or other social body, as I think you will readily agree.

The root is taken for granted, I said. Yet it sometimes happens that something goes wrong with it. People, communities, companies may experience problems with their identity. When things go wrong in this way, "contact is lost," as it is often put. Contact between people, between products and market, between government and civilians, between man and wife, whatever. Now, the usual response to these mishaps is to increase the exchange of *information* in the 'modern' sense of the word, or to improve the communication *system* in its 'modern' sense: to add more pipelines, more meetings, more memos, to re-think the structure of the organization. But amidst all that turmoil and reorganization, the root of the evil, the lost identity, is very often neglected and remains in the background. Apparently, it lies so far down that the *real* problem is left untouched, in spite of the costly measures taken to improve the situation.

Questions of identity are not *completely* neglected, to be sure. In the business communication market, we see a growing interest in phenomena like branding, creating corporate identities, leadership and inspiration, group dynamics, motivational trainings, and Asian models of total employee devotion. I think that is in many ways a good thing, or at least a *sign* of something good: that questions of identity are given the thought they deserve.

### *The paradox of photography*

Let me now turn more specifically to photography. As I use that term here, it should be taken in the broad sense of 'visual imaging'. It includes not only traditional photography, but also the world of consumer video and a variety of new digital techniques, including digital photography and scanning. I want to address a number of communication problems for the imaging business, or rather *possible* communication problems, because these problems need not actually be occurring here and now. In my view, the very nature of photography and imaging entails that it may suffer from a defective identity, hence that it may (come to) experience certain communication problems when it comes to making "things click". These problems may specifically occur between the line of trade (retail) and the market (customer). I will try to diagnose the problems and explore some possible solutions.

In my view, photography faces the following paradox: it is a form of visual imaging, but it has virtually no image itself, and no self-image to speak of. There are no clear optics involved, so to speak. There is no clear vision of who does it, how he or she does it and why he or she does it. This reflects upon the companies involved in photography. Crudely put, I never know quite what to expect when entering a photo shop.

Why the paradox? The profession is imaging, yet the profession has no image. Usually these things have deeper reasons. I want to suggest two such reasons, both of an admittedly abstract and 'philosophical' nature. One reason concerns the *metaphysics* of photography, the other the *ethics* of photography.

### *The metaphysics and ethics of photography*

First the metaphysics of photography, by which I mean here: the essence (or part of it) of what photography is and does. Photographs can almost literally capture all things, any subject at all. And people may take pictures for infinite reasons in infinitely many ways. I think this

has always been true, but it is certainly true since the photo-camera became a mass-market product. Professionals like artists and journalists, and of course also 'photographers', as they are called with characteristic lack of specificity, take their pictures for as many different reasons, of as many different subjects, and in as many different ways, as 'ordinary people' wanting to capture holidays and family life. As a summary of the incredibly vast range of photography, think of Bruce Bernard's recently published ten-pound book for the Phaidon Press, *Century, One hundred years of human progress, regression, suffering and hope*. "Progress, regression, suffering and hope", perhaps that sums it up, and perhaps it doesn't.

The variety of motives, people and subjects makes it difficult for the photo business to identify itself with anything in particular. There is really nothing definite to *identify* with. This poses a problem for the communication between product and market, between company and customer. If not enough is shared, there is nothing to communicate.

A second reason behind the paradox may be the ethics of photography. Consider, for instance, what happens when films are handed in for development, or when the finished prints are returned to the customer. The photo shop feels a professional duty to make it its business *not* to be interested in the contents of the film or in the nature of the pictures, simply out of respect for the customer's privacy. What a customer does with a camera is his or her own affair. This ethical requirement of customer anonymity and professional disinterest is bound to influence the self-perception of the photo trade, hence also its attitude and appearance.<sup>6</sup> If customers *need* or *want* to remain anonymous, there is precious little to identify with. And again, if there are not enough clues for identification, there is nothing to communicate, really.

I am aware of the exceptions to this 'sombre' picture. Customers may also be wanting advice on which camera to buy, or which film to use. They may want to learn how to improve their technique. They may want to discuss their pictures, discuss the composition or the possibilities of an enlargement, the choice of a frame to go with a certain photograph. All that happens. But it happens only *sometimes*, it is not the *bulk* of the business.

<sup>6</sup> If this self-image is taken one step too far, we would end up with salespersons who see themselves as professionally brainless, so to speak.

### *The paradox revisited*

Whether these suggestions are right or not, the paradox is real enough, and it reflects on the trade. With notable exceptions, photo shops are very often rather faceless. They are often dull and unexciting, often disorderly, especially the smaller ones. Amazing bric-a-brac of cameras, tripods, frames and bags, these shops are not very inviting.

The 'message' sent out by these shops, so to speak, is something like the following: "If you need a new film, if you want a film developed, if you are looking for a new camera, a tripod stand, a camera bag, a photo album or a frame — whoever you are, try your luck here, we may have what you want." What to expect? Well, "You may find us friendly or offhand, well-assorted or not, amateuristic or professional, knowledgeable or ignorant, obliging or rough and uninterested. We may or we may not have a place for you to sit down and view your pictures. There may or there may not be room for two adults and two children." And so on.

You will find this sketch of the trade utterly repulsive. You may be unable to see anything in it that even remotely resembles your own shops. Yours may be perfect, as far as anyone can tell, or maybe they are *nearly* perfect. Consider my sketch, then, as a picture of the competition. But also remember that there is a lesson the competition may take to heart.

If the root of success, in business and elsewhere, is communication, and if communication is having an identity that can be shared by the right people, then the photo business is in trouble. Or at least it may be in trouble. Or at least the *competition* is. Or at least it may be in the long run, for I am trying to be prognostic here. The right people (that is to say, the customers) will fail to identify with the products and with the providers. They will not know what to expect in a photo shop. They feel uncomfortable, they want to leave. They will hardly feel inspired by their visit to the shop, nor strengthened by a mutual understanding or a shared goal. Alienated, they will end up with the impression that photography is really a strange and almost impossible thing, something like a pet dinosaur. And pet dinosaurs are bad for business, at least in the long run.

### *A new self-image for photography?*

What can be done about these projections? Is there anything that *needs* to be done, and should it be done *now*? No, there is nothing that should be done *now*, nor is there anything

that *must* be done. You can always go with the flow of things. Wait and see what happens. I may be wrong about the problems and wrong about the future. Or I may be right, but the mechanism I refer to works too slowly to be interesting for you.

Be that as it may. See what you can do with it. My feeling is that if you want to do business, and if you want to *develop* your business, that development should be *sustainable*. Meet the needs of the present without compromising the options for the future. That can be done only, as far as I can see, if you have a *sense* of development, a sense of identity, just like an organism that develops.

I simply want to challenge you to think about that identity, about the essence of photography — not in terms of figures and facts, markets and films per head of the population, but in terms of what you and your customers can identify with, now and in the future. Let me conclude here by giving you some examples of what I have in mind.

The ‘photographic image’, as discussed here, so far centered on anonymity and universality, two traits that were really too vague to be useful. Now, they *can* be turned into assets. If you concentrate on them hard enough, you get two self-images for the trade and two clues for customer identification.

The first of these images is *service* — plain, clean, specialized, effective service. Some of the most successful retailers in your market have chosen this image, as I understand. It is really a response to customer anonymity. “Buy your films here, hand in your pictures for developing. That is what we do, and what we do best. We are a lean, mean photo service machine.” The context of the ‘service machine’ is often a warehouse or a supermarket. In that type of setting, a clean, fresh and clear, conveniently arranged service desk may welcome photo customers in much the same way the butcher’s counter does, or the baker’s corner, or the cheese section. In a warehouse, the photo department shares its image and identity with lipstick and baby diapers, or with sunglasses and kitchenware.

Service is one possibility. As a second example, you may also turn the *universality* of product and customer into a positive thing. Decorate your shops with appealing pictures from all over the world. Decorate it with pictures of people taking pictures in all cultures and countries. Create a media image emphasizing the fact that *everyone* takes pictures, amateurs and professionals alike. Create a global, universal photo community everyone belongs to. Whoever is not part of it must think, “Hey, there’s something wrong with me.

Why am I no part of it?". The universality of photography is then turned into something very positive and appealing, something that *works* in terms of marketing.

There are many more possible self-images. Photography is a rich subject: it contains all sorts of identities you may want to develop and focus on. As a third example, think of *history*, or rather *anti-history*. "There is only one way to stop time from ticking into the future. Freeze it." *Click*. To underscore this aspect of photography, a variety of visualizations are available. You may want to use 'famous pictures' of historical events or of the 'cultural icons' that we all share (the first man on the Moon, Einstein, Hiroshima), or you may want to develop media exhibitions of the history of portrait photography, for instance, or of family life, of children's portraits, warfare, sporting events, and so on. You can make freezing history your business. You can turn photography into the art of freezing history. Strictly speaking, it already *is* that art, of course. But you can make people realize it, you can create a community of history stoppers.

Then there is *creativity*. Appeal to the artist in your customer. I do not mean the artists *among* your customers, but the artist hidden inside each of us. Appeal to our common sense of beauty, of what is visually appealing. Make people realize that what they want to do is make beautiful pictures. Find a way to inspire them in this project, and make sure that they know how *you* can help them.

Then there is *reproduction*. "Some things happen only once. But you can reproduce them." That is what photography is and does, too. Again, reproduction is something you can enlarge on. Much the same goes for other candidates you may want to consider. Other possible self-images include *ease* (but then make sure your products *are* easy to use), *digital vs. analog* (you may want to create a virtual community on the Web), *interactivity* (think of a virtual photolab on the Web), and *innovation*.

Whichever of these themes you would prefer to choose, the important thing is that they should be taken up *separately* and worked out *consistently*, for otherwise the effect of customer identification will be spoiled. Consistency in the choice of identity demands a reflection on the general attitude and appearance of your salespersons, the general atmosphere of your stores, the optical display of products, services, and facilities, the arrangement and decoration of the store's interior. It should reflect on window dressing, on promotional activities, and on the choice of price and assortment. All these mundane matters of product retailing may need re-thinking.

Finally, notice that questions of identity and self-image go well beyond the fleeting themes of promotional campaigns, such as 'snowboarding' for winter campaigns and 'foreign cities' or 'beach volleyball' for summer campaigns. The identity discussed here goes deeper and lasts much longer. Promotional campaigns will certainly be affected by it, but they will not be defined by it. They are short-lived and can be changed, like clothing fashions and holiday destinations. The underlying identity is something different from that, like the person who wears the clothes and who takes a vacation. That identity is worth concentrating on, for it is what pays the bills, eventually.