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A Heretic Communication About Communication About Reality

by Klaus Krippendorff
University of Pennsylvania

Thank you for the trust expressed in inviting me to this celebration. I am particularly honored to speak as a graduate of the communication program and hope that it is not presumptuous of me to add the thanks of many alumni to my personal appreciation for having here developed visions of professional possibilities and meant to pursue them.

I want to talk about epistemology, the epistemology of communication research. I firmly believe that the awareness of how we come to know lies at the root of understanding communication and should inform communication research as well.

Traditionally we were taught in what I now call the orthodox tradition. In this tradition we take for granted and even insist that communication always is about something: ideas, events, vicarious experiences or problems of interpersonal or social significance. Communication research inquires into how communication and the orthodox approach must additionally separate the object from the process of inquiry by the very same logic. Consequently, the publication of findings and theories by communication researchers is communication among social scientists about communication among people about their world. And this would make my epistemological concern "communication about communication about communication about reality," hence the title of this talk.

This three-level remoteness from reality is not a more trivial play with words. I am suggesting here that this orthodox view of communication entails an epistemological trap which artificially separates the observer from the observed, creates oppressive authority structures and prevents us from getting critically involved with our own realities.

I am anticipating that many students and scholars of communication, included in this audience, will find such claims difficult to accept or even believe. But I am not dismayed, for my etymological dictionary shows the Greek root of the word "heretic" to describe someone capable of seeing options, willing to act and to take responsibilities in the face of an orthodoxy that is either blind or prohibits such paths to be explored. I feel comfortable enough with this sense to invite you on a dangerously enlightening journey through a small part of the land of communication, its construction in discourse and the possibilities it has in its womb.

In order that you may not get lost on this journey, let me sketch a rough map of how I will proceed.

Firstly, I shall explain my methodology or build a platform for you to stand on during this journey.

Secondly, with this in mind, I want to lead you to encounter two exemplars of constructing communication, communication as sharing and communication as control, and explore with you some of their cognitive, interactive and institutional implications.

Thirdly, I shall invite you to take a bird's eye view of what we will then have seen along the path so far taken and from this position suggest what might be the most spectacular features of communication yet to be explored.

Finally, I shall recommend to you how communication research might be practiced and useful in the future, leaving you to find your own way through the remaining territory.

As proposed, I will start with some comments on "methodology" (in quotation marks).

Metaphor

Surely we can agree that we engage each other in communication through language, whether in the process of research or in everyday life. My talk is embedded in language as well and in the same language in fact. In contrast with the orthodox view of language as descriptive or representative of something, I have come to be convinced by another view of language that takes its interactive use or discourse as its principal function. I don't want to drop names or review variations on this theme, but take just one very old concept that has recently been revitalized in this not so old view of language and cognition and this is metaphor.

I have to remind you that in the orthodox tradition metaphors are considered illogical figures of speech and most scientists who might enjoy metaphors in poetry bane them from scientific discourse for fear of the ambiguity and confusion of reference they might cause. In contrast, I found metaphors to be more revealing than "straight" or literal talk and seem to be as agreements on this with several anthropologists and linguists, most recently with George Lakoff. Because of obviously diverging attitudes towards metaphors, let me demonstrate how I will employ the notion here on a perhaps worn-out example. Consider the rather ordinary expression: "head of the household.

It has two separate semantic domains: that of living organisms and that of a family living under one roof. Now, we know that household have members and so do organisms and there is therefore some minimal correspondence between the two domains. But in the biological world the head is a special kind of member. It houses the brain. It is where decisions are made. And removing an organism's head leaves the remainder unable to function. Applied to a family, as it were, this organismic metaphor structures that family consistent with how we believe organisms work and by designating one member as its head makes that member the most important one, the only one that counts, the only one in charge and on whom all others depend. Unlike analogies which merely claim resemblances, metaphor actively organizes the domain of experience to which they are applied.

Metaphors are more affective when they fill a void in understanding something new or something difficult to grasp. In accomplishing such feats, metaphors do not simply explain poetically or provide a fancy understanding of something else; I maintain that they are the very manifestations of that understanding. After accepting a metaphorical phrase like "head of the household," the family simply can no longer be what it may have been before. It is now experienced through this metaphor. In other words, metaphors supply the very pattern of organization we now see for a fact.

In the orthodox tradition, it is difficult to operationally define metaphor and those in this tradition who tried either failed or rendered it as some kind of inconclusive analogy. In contrast, it is easy not only to give examples for metaphors, as I have done, but also to suggest metaphors of metaphor. The expression: "metaphor are paraphrases (of experienced)" may serve this purpose. Whether it condenses what I have been saying about metaphor so far is for you to decide. But, the very possibility of a metaphor of metaphor suggests to me that understanding metaphors presupposes metaphorical understanding, and points to the circularity of a cognitive universal that escapes literal discourse, is inaccessible from a reality outside cognition, and cannot be described from a meta-language above language. I find the metaphorical structuring of unfamiliar, unstructured or "ill-structured" experiences and its fundamentally self-contained understanding quite remarkable.
But to me most important are the entailments that metaphors can piggyback with each other to create new and richer meanings. They may start from one domain and then find their way to another. If one conceives of a family to have a head, one would not want to interview or interact with any of its feet or bones about the opinions held by dependents, including of course the legs. And the domain of metaphor must then be inferior to and less informed by the head. Such entailments may not be logically deductive, as the orthodox view might require, but are nevertheless decisive. It is as if the expression of urgency and proposing to "diffuse the explosive situation" whereas using the metaphor of a boat sailed and subsequently cut down in a concave exposed for coping with scarce resources and preventing squeezing us to death.

Similarly, Donald Schon compared the public policy entailments of alternative metaphors used in descriptions of a particular slum area in Boston. The use of medical metaphors, characterizing it as a "diseased and crime-infested area," entailed treating it from the outside by forcefully removing what is "decayed," isolating infectious elements, and so forth, whereas the use of anthropological metaphors, characterizing it as a "supportive community of impoverished people," entailed making material resources available for improvements decided upon inside that community.

Acting on such entailments—whether by interviewing the head of a household, proposing a diffusion of the time bomb or removing cancerous growths—reifies the metaphors and makes the paraphrase and the paraphrased experientially, interactively and institutionally indiscriminable. No words, no matter how imbued with the language that requires the independence of description and which is thought to be shared by metaphors that fuse or, as the orthodox might say, confuse these levels.

To conclude what I want to say about methodology, I consider the occurrence of entailments as validating incidences for the working of a metaphor and their coherence with the metaphor as a basis for their connection. In fact, the orthodoxy insists on confirming predictions that logically follow from a model or theory may not be so different except for the ontological assumptions the orthodox approach implies and mine does not.

With this somewhat lengthy explanation but minimal vocabulary, I want to examine the two exemplars: communication as sharing and communication as control.

Communication as Sharing
Communication as sharing is invoked by claiming the word communication to be a relative of communion, of community, of communitas, denoting things in common. It consists of a cluster of at least three mutually supporting metaphors.

The first might be called the messages are containers metaphor. We ask for the meaning a poem has, we inquire what is in a letter, what someone got out of a lecture or complain that someone is reading something into the message that isn't there. Even more literally, we analyze the content of messages as meaningful or fall of meaning, declare a paper to be grammatical with ideas or clear there wasn't anything new in it at all. Similarly, engineers speak about signals carrying information and noise. All of these phrases depict linguistic expressions, pictures, electronic signals as containers of meanings, ideas or things that are put into that container and may later be taken out.

A corollary of the container metaphor is that messages, information and contents are entities of a particular kind. We get something out of a show. We receive pieces of news or items of information. We believe someone told half of the story. We post such tangible things as signs at appropriate places. In content analysis we categorize units of content not much different from how a geologist might sort stones into boxes, except for differences in labels. Even so, symbols are thought of as established by conventions and stones are natural; the distinction reveals both as tangible entities. The difference in the two kinds of objects presumably lies in who made them.

When messages and contents are conceived as entities, it is only natural to see communication as a conduit. We convey messages through a channel much like we force water to flow through a hose. We may not get a message across, whether due to gatekeepers, bottlenecks, block filters, or disruptions, all terms which describe these break points. And when we work long it takes for a legation to take effect we refer to long pipelines through the administration. In fact the military still equates communications with transportation which entails shipping some material entity from one place to another.

To me it always is remarkable how little this metaphorical complex of containers, entities and conduits entails about communicators, senders or receivers, or to what the participants in communication are reduced. Naturally, since messages are containers, when two people serve themselves content from the same container they are then sharing their content whether this sharing takes place between a sender who has put the content in and a receiver who has taken that content out, or between multiple receivers of the same message, as mass communication audiences are presumed to do.

The image of two partly overlapping circles, the famous Venn-diagram, is widely used as a visual metaphor to differentiate what is shared and what is not, who is in and who is out, the intersection being reserved for the aim, the result and the value which implicates an action of sharing at the expense of the tails of statistical distributions, and in either case reduce communication to some kind of exposure and reduction of the people involved in communication to complex Venn-diagrams.

I believe, the productivity of much of communication research is rooted in the coherence of the metaphors just described or (what they render communication to be) and the methodology and practice of theory construction in the natural sciences. Even though their respective terms may differ, their grammar does not and I maintain that together they conspire in studying communication as a matter of physical contact with containers whose tangible contents are consumed by trivial organisms that can hardly ask questions such as the less tangible ones.

There may be several of you who might think "to what," and argue "success is all that counts" and "40 years of an Institute of Communication Research is living proof of social usefulness." I even agree to some extent. But the costs for this success may be less than destroying. To show this I want to go one step further and talk about what is to me the most important fact that is constitutively oppressive. I am suggesting that it invites and nourishes and hence cannot be separated from the institution of authority, an authority that is constitutively oppressive. Let me start with messages as containers of entities.

Entities must be able to exist independent of a receiver else they could not be shipped to someone. Therefore, the entities that communicate belong to an observer independent objective reality. In the orthodox tradition, observation means identifying what an entity objectively is and the notion of a universe admin only one interpretation. Indeed, we unquestioningly speak of the content of a book as if there were only one way of reading it, or of the linguistically correct interpretation of a sentence as if every literate person would share this understanding, and we might even consult a dictionary to make the point. Only magicians could pour wine and see out of the same bottle and we don't have their skill as a "trick" which is not detailed by the metaphor of communication as sharing does not provide for this possibility. And yet, the experiences of well justified differences in perceiving, in understanding and in knowing what something is, means, or what someone had in mind, abound. Such differences are expected and can be experienced all the time in our everyday communication and in communication research as well. How could they be explained or handled while maintaining the metaphor or communication as sharing? I am suggesting there are three normal responses; all of them I think are basically invalid.
Firstly, differences may be dismissed as errors, pathological, defensive mismatches or mere entertainment. We dismiss them as errors when we can trace differences to accidents, inequalities or involuntary happenings. We dismiss them as pathological when we can explain them in terms of uniform conditions like that of schizophrenia which can not help but express themselves in characteristically deviant ways. We dismiss them as defensive mismatches when we have been repeatedly assured for them, like the calculated ambiguities in political election campaigns or simple lies. Finally we dismiss them as entertaining curiosity when we can discount their reality, like the parodies that amused logicians for two thousand years until Whitehead and Russell's theory of logical types ruled them completely out of existence and meaningless.

Now that all of these dismissals presuppose and are entirely based on assuming the authority to do so. Those who can dismiss what others get from their messages must be free of these dismissals and not be helpful when we are already deceiving ourselves by widely using the metaphor of sharing what creates authority above people and has no respect for the autonomy of human cognition either.

To summarize: when the "communication is sharing" metaphor permeates a discourse, differences in interpretation call for authorities to resolve them and where such calls are heard, institutional hierarchies inevitably follow, and when authorities thrive on something, they naturally promote it.

Communication as control

In the West, perhaps more so in the United States than in Europe, another important metaphor for communication reigns as well. Shall I call it the control metaphor? It too contains a collective intuition, a generalization, a schematic that rules over what a correct interpretation is, and I have actually no quarrel with this when discourse is possible. But when authors cannot mediate between different readings, there always are authorities, experts, rulers, judges, who are either invited or eager to impose their legitimate authority on such situations. Professors enjoy the privilege of institutional authority on what is relevant and how reality is to be interpreted. Scientific procedures too confer institutional authority on facts that non-scientists may not doubt for fear of the inevitable ridicule this would entail. But probably the most important institutional authority is the legal system. The interaction among lawyers, judges, law enforcers, etc. is designed to channel and mediate controversies that inevitably consist of conflicting interpretations of what the relevant facts are and whose solution is to be considered fair. By design, a court always disposes all best version.

Thirdly, differences that can be neither dismissed nor resolved by mediation yield physical violence. Most physical violence in the United States occurs not on the streets, as television tries to make us believe, but in homes. And violence in families rarely is about food, love or children but about who is right and who has the authority to decide on the representation others must accept as true. Also international conflicts are embedded in language, with one side claiming to be correct, honorable, historically justified and blinding the other for their unwillingness to share this one interpretation. I do not want to give the impression that all violence is solely based on language, but that much of it is evidence of the sharing metaphor at work in situations in which it doesn't fit.

Some critical scholars discuss violence in terms of power and ideology. But I find the use of this physical metaphor disturbing and not useful when we are already deceiving ourselves by widely using the metaphor of sharing what creates authority above people and has no respect for the autonomy of human cognition either.

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Now, let me backtrack for a moment.

I have described two metaphors of communication, sharing and control, which we all seem to use fluidly and casually. On the surface, you will probably agree, they both seem rather innocent but upon analysis their entailments turn out to have more frightening consequences. Can we choose between supporting our research either naked authority or improving manipulative interests? Do we feel more comfortable with controlling or an individuality to a perhaps seductive consensual ideal, which sharing entails, or with becoming trivial components of a perhaps beautiful rational machinery that control requires?

You may resort to the sceptical answer to such dilemmas and say "that all depends on the context or on the purpose." But then you have already opted for the control metaphor that allows values and exchanges making them the means of other ends but cannot reflect on the rationality implied therein.

You may think of avoiding such choices altogether by appealing to majority opinion. But then you submit to an authority which has at least today already been eclipsed by massive systems of popular entertainment that are designed to achieve industrially desirable communication effects and are by popularity accepted for what they do.

I do believe we are badly caught in an epistemological trap. We are victimized by our own unreflective use of metaphors of communication and by an orthodox approach to language and research that blinds us against recognizing the very constructions of ourselves that keep us there.

Let me therefore spend the remainder of this journey to point out some ladders for escape.

Five Crucial Properties of Communication

The above two metaphors of communication, I am asking myself and will try to answer the question "what is so special about communication that two (or more) metaphors can make it into such different phenomena?" Or what could it be that invites some metaphors to reign supreme, at the exclusion of others? The orthodox answer to these questions simply is to collect more data, to develop axioms, or to move to more heights of abstraction. In view of what I have been saying, I think such recommendations are like encouragements to continue running against the same wall only harder.

I prefer instead to examine our very own experiences and communication practices. Let me shortcut this process by sketching five propositional constructs.

1. Constructions of communication are within a wide range quite arbitrary. Obviously, communication as sharing is one way of conceiving how we interact. Communication as control is another construction. And I can think of many more, for example, what Lakeoff and Johnson have called the argument is what is metaphor or what has been described as the knowledge is seeing metaphor. They too are intertwined with the practice of communication.

2. Knowledge about communication resides in its practice. We can inquire about communication only through its practices. Both metaphors date a relationship to cognition, interactions and institutions. I define cognition as the creation of the realities we see, interaction as the way in which we communicate with each other and institutions, such as Wittgenstein's language games. But Austin certainly recognized in his performances that speech acts can summarize an asset and establish the facts they are asserting, such as in promises, committments, marriage vows, etc., all of which are fundamental to human communication and incidentally not representable in computers. Bateson's and later Wattsawick's et al.'s notion that interpersonal communication may be about something, but more importantly establishes, reafirms or alters relationship between communicants without explicitly referring to them, point to the same thing.

Whereas the orthodox must insist on a rigid separation of communication and what this communication is about, I am arguing that communication does not merely describe, it constitutes the very reality we communicate about. To constitute means to define or establish itself and there is therefore no necessary epistemological difference between what we know, what we practice and what we see in communication.

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4. Communication processes, language and technology convergence. The relationship between language use and seeing is a cognitive consequence of communication practice. But this relationship goes much further. The "head of the household" metaphor does not merely make its user see a family as an organism, it also coordinates actions with and between members: deferring decisions, interviewing, paying salaries, collecting taxes, and so forth. Such interactions tend to force family members into roles compatible with the metaphor. Specifically, employing control metaphors in communication about language does not only make us see audiences as consumers of entertainment, we also frame our research questions and findings accordingly. When published, with the usual authority of a scientific report, those who watch television are not the only ones to learn about their passivity from research findings. The industry will do its best to tailor its language and technology to encourage these descriptions. Publications about communication set in motion cycles of material adaptation alike to self-affirming prophesies that often converge and then ultimately terminate in consensus on how people normally and repeatedly interact with each other. This interaction also extends to technology which becomes the ultimate objectification of this consensus. Thus, communication does not merely describe, as the orthodox have it, it brings forth, establishes, constitutes and creates the world we thereafter have to live in. It is by practicing communication that reality is negotiated, society is constituted, technology is designed and things happen.

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Notes

1. One could characterize this tradition also as postcriticism and eutopism. It assumes the existence of a single, objective and hence observer-independent reality that needs to be discovered and described without or with only minimal disturbance by the scientific observer. Even when this tradition admits to the artificial nature of human communication, positivist or naturalist techniques of research render communication as an observer-independent phenomenon.


3. Universals of this kind are not merely properties common to all members of the species, but more importantly, they cannot easily if at all be removed once instituted. When A depends on C and C depends on C, then A, B and C are circularly dependent on each other and jointly autonomous. I believe cognition involves many such self-sustaining patterns.


5. I have to include myself here for I too have been unthinkingly used such metaphors in the past.

6. The naive physics in this notion of communication defies the very first law of thermodynamics according to which matter and energy and hence anything physical that may be transmitted can neither created nor destroyed. Message content seems insubstantial and may be removed from its container repeatedly and without loss.

7. In all modesty, I have to exclude here my own conception of content analysis which demands of analysis that they construct their own contexts for making sense of data or for drawing valid inferences from text. In this conception, meaning is never contained in messages but arises in observer mediated interaction between data or text and their appropriately constructed contexts. See Klaus Krippendorff, Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980.

8. Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver. The Mathematical Theory of Communication. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949. I might add that the publication of this book must be credited to Wilbur Schramm’s foresight as director of the University of Illinois Press. It is still in press and a classic whose continuous publication record of nearly 40 years is unsurpassed by any other book on communication theory.


13. In his Observing Systems, Seaside, CA: Intersem Publications, 1981, Heinz von Foerster identified "objectivity" with the positivist maxim according to which "the properties of the observer shall not enter in the description of his observations" and "post-objectivity" with the description of observations shall reveal the properties of the observer" (page xvi).


18. The aesthetic imperative reads CONSTRUCT YOUR OWN REALITY TO SEE and has been sufficiently elaborated in the preceding.

19. This deliberately expands on Heinz von Foerster’s ethical imperative: “Act always so as to increase the number of choices” (p. 308, Observing Systems, op. cit.) by locating it in interaction or communication practices and preventing not only the numerical narrowing of choices but also the forcing of people into domains of individually meaningless decision making.