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Communication Concepts

COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS

ERIN HAWLEY

Deakin University

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Recommended citation: Hawley, E. (2023). *Communication Concepts*. Deakin University. https://deakin.pressbooks.pub/communicationconcepts/.

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Cover design by Kym Lam Sam.

This book was produced with Pressbooks (https://pressbooks.com) and rendered with Prince.

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Welcome to *Communication Concepts*.

This book offers a repository of ideas and a set of thinking tools for approaching and understanding communication from diverse scholarly, professional, and cultural perspectives.

You may be reading this book as a member of the learning community of ACX701 Communication Concepts, a Master of Communication unit taken by students at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. If you are, welcome – you are joining a learning community full of people like yourself who are interested in the many fantastic, intricate, powerful ways in which communication shapes our world.

But what makes this book so exciting is that it *extends* the Communication Concepts learning community. It is itself an act of communication that speaks *about* and *to* communicators everywhere.

I hope you enjoy it.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of all the unceded lands, skies and waterways on which Deakin University students and teachers come together – the Wadawurrung people of the Kulin Nation, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and the Peek Whurrong people of the Maar Nation.

I myself am located on Wurundjeri Country, where most of the work for this book was conducted. On behalf of this book's co-authors and readers, I pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Traditional Custodians, Elders and Ancestors. In creating this open educational resource I acknowledge with gratitude that education has a long and rich heritage on this continent.

I also acknowledge that the scholarship of communication is enriched when we reflect on the meaning of place. When we communicate, it's important to think about where we are communicating from: our places, and the contexts, traditions, and cultures in which our communication is embedded.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a book is a privilege. Even more of a privilege is writing a book on a subject you're passionate about, drawing on everything that excites and inspires you about your teaching practice. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have taught ACX701 Communication Concepts for the past four years and to have worked in the Postgraduate Communication space, where scholars and practitioners connect over their desire to tell compelling stories to diverse audiences across the shifting sands of a constantly changing communication landscape.

This book was a collective endeavour and I am fortunate to have received much support from Deakin University in the form of an OER grant. A huge thank you goes to the OER team at Deakin Library, especially to Angie Williamson who has championed OER and supported my own work here – and the work of other authors – in such a knowledgeable and encouraging way. Much thanks also to Astrid Bovell and Luke Watsford for their copyright advice, and to Alison Leedy for her help with learning design and layout.

To my student co-authors – you are wonderful! This book would not have happened without you and is the result of your hard work, creativity, and great thinking. Special thank you to Kym Lam Sam for his amazing work on the cover design.

In addition to the student co-authors listed on the next page, this book has benefitted from and been inspired by the Communication Concepts learning community. Where possible, the student work and ideas mentioned in the chapters ahead have been reproduced with permission and I am deeply grateful to the students who allowed their voices, thoughts, or research to be shared.

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Cover design by Kym Lam Sam.

PART I

CHAPTER 1: COMMUNICATION

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

In 2020, environmental thought leader and celebrity Sir David Attenborough made his Instagram debut. Known for his work as an author, presenter, and filmmaker, Attenborough was 94 years old when he signed up to the social media platform for the first time. Within an hour of his first post he had more than 200,000 followers, with the numbers swelling to 1.2 million later that day, according to the BBC.

Attenborough used his first social media post to make a powerful statement about what communication means in times of crisis. He was referring specifically to climate change, but his words have broader resonance. "Saving our planet", he said, "is now a communications challenge".

Of course, science data has shown for decades that the "world is in trouble", as Attenborough phrased it in his post. A global failure to act on climate change is often attributed to communication breakdown – an inability to explain the problem, to make it relevant, to move audiences sufficiently, to make people care; an inability to deal with increasing volumes of misinformation and competing viewpoints about an unequivocal scientific fact.

But climate change is not the only "communication challenge" we face in the early decades of the 21st century. In the fields of health, science, politics, and social justice – and beyond – experts, leaders, and other stakeholders struggle to communicate with diverse audiences about complex, multifaceted problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic was also a communication challenge. In a similar vein to Attenborough, António Guterres, the ninth Secretary-General of the United Nations, stated during the pandemic that "good communication saves lives". At the time, scientists, health professionals, political leaders, and organisations like the WHO were desperately trying to provide citizens with clear, accurate information about the virus and the protection measures needed to minimise loss of life, but they were hampered by competing claims, falsities, ambiguities, uncertainties, and cultural barriers.

Communication is also of vital concern in times of international conflict and war. During the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza, ongoing as of the time of writing, it has never been clearer that access to accurate information is a human right. In Gaza, digital channels are being used to share warnings and evacuation orders, but they are also being used to spread misinformation and to incite discrimination and fear. In October and November 2023, the citizens of Gaza experienced communication blackouts due to lack of fuel and damage to telecommunications infrastructure. According to the CDAC Network (2023), the impacts of these blackouts were catastrophic and multifaceted: individuals couldn't access critical information or contact loved ones; aid agencies could not coordinate assistance; media coverage could not be relied upon.

Regardless of whether we are talking about climate, COVID, war, or the countless other global issues that mark our current moment in time, these "communication challenges" are compounded by misinformation, polarisation, and the speed at which information circulates today. In the digital age there has been a proliferation of the platforms, channels, devices, and tools that enable all of us, as citizens, to share our thoughts and connect with others – and yet it is becoming harder and harder to be heard. Today's

media landscape is often described as cluttered, crowded, or saturated. Audiences, in turn, are said to be distracted, time-poor, and plagued by information overload. The people who know how to reach these elusive audiences are those who can craft their messages effectively and who understand the intricacies of an increasingly complex media landscape – and such people are valued across a variety of fields, industries, and professions.



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

This is a book about communication and it has been written at a time when "communication challenges" abound. It considers communication to be both an object of academic scholarship and a practical endeavour undertaken by diverse actors with a plethora of motivations, often in urgent and vital contexts. In the chapters ahead, we'll explore the various ways in which communication matters, with four fundamental ideas in mind:

1. Communication is a process, not a thing.
2. Communication is the process by which meaning is shared, negotiated, and contested.
3. Communication also shapes meaning, and in so doing, it shapes action.
4. Communication is deeply entangled with social issues, power, and everyday life.

When Attenborough made his record-breaking post on Instagram, he was cognisant of these four fundamental ideas. This is not surprising: he is a successful, globally recognised communicator with over seven decades of experience. But what does this example really show us? It shows us that communication is

not, and has never been, separate from other spheres of study, professional practice, or personal experience. Indeed, communication is a skill that is required in almost all professional, personal, and scholarly settings today.

And communication flows like an undercurrent beneath all social issues, enabling or impeding social change. Meanwhile, the vast majority of professional communicators are spending more time navigating societal issues than ever before (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations 2022). Communication can change the world, but the shifting textures of the world are themselves reshaping communication.

So let's dive in, and explore what communication means – and *how* it means – and why it matters.

In this chapter...

Each chapter of this book is broken into sections (like this one). You've just finished reading the first section of Chapter 1.

What's ahead in Chapter 1?

What is communication?

The sharing of meaning

Case study – the misogyny speech

Communication – who and where?

A more-than-human process

Why this book? The usefulness of communication concepts

Chapter 1 wrap-up

The references for all content cited in each chapter can be found in the final section or "chapter wrap-up".

You can continue reading Chapter 1 by clicking the small "Next" button in the bottom right corner of your screen, or **follow this link**.

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

This book investigates the who, where, and how of communication, but it's important to also start with the what.

Answering a question like "what is communication?" is much like trying to see and study the air we breathe or the sounds we hear – it's difficult to define something in which we are embedded or entangled, something that surrounds us so completely. Nevertheless, people have been asking this question – what is communication? – for centuries.

One of the interesting things about our position as communication scholars in the early 21st century is that we can benefit from the deep thinking of researchers who have come before us, although an equally interesting challenge confronts us: how do we adapt this past thinking to suit a world that has changed rapidly and will continue to evolve at breakneck speed?

Things to think about...

How do you define communication?

Where do those ideas come from?

Are there any types of communication that aren't captured by your definition?

The transmission model

One of the most enduring models of communication comes from a paper published in 1948 by Claude Shannon. Shannon was an American mathematician and a leading thinker in the field of information theory. He is credited with the first use of the word "bit" (as in binary digit: information stored as a combination of ones and zeroes).

Shannon was also, according to his biography in Encyclopedia Britannica – and the documentary film about his life, *The Bit Player* – an eccentric man whose interests included juggling while unicycle riding. We can detect some of this playfulness in the nature of his inquiry into communication, which is questioning, persistent, and takes nothing for granted. The very act of wanting to determine *how communication works* indicates a mind that was not satisfied with existing explanations and that, indeed, saw the very existence of widely held explanations as a provocation to crack things open and bring new knowledge to light.

It's worth taking a moment to imagine what it would have been like to study communication in the 1930s and 1940s, as the world was first plunged into and then emerged from the largest and most devastating global conflict it had yet seen. Consider the mechanisms and technologies of communication that dominated at the time. Individuals and households relied upon newspapers, radio, and the telephone to stay informed and connected. Radio communication was of crucial importance during the war, but radio signals could be easily intercepted – cryptography consequently became important. It is likely for this reason that early models of communication were particularly concerned with **efficacy**: getting the message to the right person in the right way.

Given Shannon's background in mathematics, it is perhaps unsurprising that the paper in which he published his model was called "A mathematical theory of communication" (later elaborated on by Shannon and co-author Warren Weaver in a 1949 book of the same name). With mathematical precision, Shannon broke the process of communication down into the following components: sender (or "source"), message, receiver, and destination. He was particularly interested in the impact of **noise**: anything that disrupts the signal or confuses the message.

You may well have seen a diagram of his model before – it looks like this:

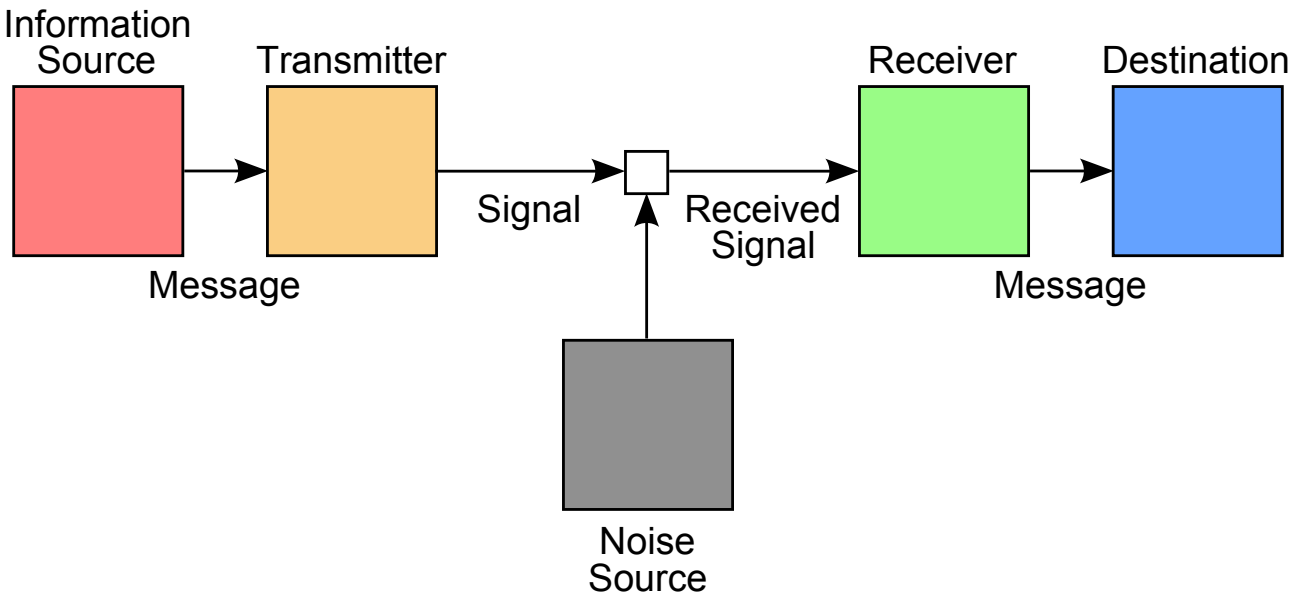


Image by User:Phlsph7, CC0, from Wikimedia Commons

Looking at this visual representation of Shannon's model, we can see that communication is being depicted here as a *flow of information*. Using a radio metaphor, this communicational flow was described by Shannon as a "transmission", and his model became known as the **transmission model of communication.**

Is the transmission model still relevant?

Shannon's paper was itself an extraordinary act of communication: he explained his model in such an influential way that we still use it widely today.

Of course, there has been an acceleration of the production and flow of information that Shannon could not have anticipated. Communication happens at speed in today's digital world.

This alone should not lead us to discount Shannon's model; indeed, it makes the model more useful. If we stop and examine these rapid flows of information using a model, we can better see what's going on behind and around them (and because of them).

But let's consider some of the complexities of our current (and ever-changing) communication and media landscape that *aren't* captured by Shannon's model.

Much of the criticism of Shannon's model in the decades since its publication stems from the lack of emphasis placed on the receivers and what they "do" with the messages they encounter. The model depicts communication from the sender's perspective and is focused on how to achieve the sender's goal: to reach the receiver in an accurate and error-free way. Later decades of communication research have explored the audience's practices and motivations in a way that *isn't* captured by Shannon's model – we'll explore some of this research in Chapter 3.

For now, consider this scenario: you're playing a video game. Perhaps you're playing on your phone; perhaps not. Perhaps you're using your phone to watch a walkthrough video helping you improve your skill in the game while you play on another device. In these situations, can you locate yourself in Shannon's model? Are you a "receiver" of a "message"?

In his book *Cybertext*, written in 1997, video game researcher Espen Aarseth asks us to think about this exact scenario, albeit with a more retro example. "When I fire a laser gun in a computer game such as Space Invaders," he asks, "where, and what, am 'I'? Am I the sender or the receiver? I am certainly part of the medium, so perhaps I am the message" (Aarseth 1997: 162).

Now imagine you post an image of yourself on social media. Can you locate yourself in Shannon's model now? As with Aarseth's example, you are the sender, but you are also part of the message, and if somebody responds to your post, you immediately become the receiver. You are, perhaps, all of these things at once – or none of them.

In this way, the simplicity of the transmission model makes it problematic because it *neglects* aspects of the communication process that are very important today, and it *makes assumptions* about the sender/receiver relationship that do not fully capture the nuances of our communication practices in a digital world.

Things to think about...

Can you come up with other examples of communication where Shannon's model doesn't quite fit?

Ahead in Chapter 1...

The sharing of meaning

THE SHARING OF MEANING

Definitions of communication abound. Indeed, a famous text explores 126 different definitions of the term (Dance and Larson 1976).

We won't be using 126 definitions in this textbook – although we *will* acknowledge the complexity of communication and the multiple perspectives from which it can be understood.

So let's establish our definition. This book defines communication as *the sharing of meaning*.

I first came across this idea of "sharing meaning" in a book called *Communicating as Professionals*, which, as the title suggests, writes to a readership of professional practitioners and offers suggestions for improving communication in professional contexts. The authors, Terry Mohan et al., define communication as "the sharing of meaning through information, ideas and feelings" (2008: 5). The influential Spanish sociologist and media theorist Manuel Castells uses a similar definition in his book *Communication Power*, where he defines communication as "the sharing of meaning through the exchange of information" (Castells 2013: 54).

If we, like Castells and Mohan et al., think of communication as the "sharing of meaning", it quickly becomes apparent that such "shared meaning" can take many forms and serve many purposes. You can share meaning through body language, through what you choose to wear or how you decorate the space around you. You can share meaning through signs, symbols, gestures, and culturally constructed actions. Sending someone a bunch of flowers on their birthday is an act of communication, whether or not you are there to deliver the flowers in person or provide a written note. In fact, you might give someone a bunch of flowers in many different contexts and you might choose different flowers for different situations because your *choice* of flower communicates something; it allows you to share *particular* meanings.

We can share meaning unintentionally. Even when we try to refrain from communicating, we are usually sharing *something*.

For example, a student who keeps their camera off during an online seminar might do so because they *don't* want to share meaning about their identity, their surroundings, or the fact that they are driving or cooking dinner when they should be listening to their lecturer. By keeping their camera off, the student thinks they are *not* communicating. But if the lecturer sees a black square where the student's face should be, they might interpret this as a lack of engagement, or even as rudeness. So the student *has* communicated with the lecturer, sharing a meaning they probably did not intend to share.

At the other end of the spectrum, communication can be a highly strategic and intentional practice. A **communication strategy** is a detailed plan for how you will engage with your audience – a sort of blueprint for communicating with stakeholders and target publics, where every aspect of the meaning-making process is carefully controlled.

Even if we're being strategic or intentional, we can share meaning in different ways and contexts, seeking diverse impacts and informed by diverse objectives. An artist might share meaning in a way that is abstract, designed to impact us on an emotional or even visceral level. An activist might share meaning in a way that

is provocative, designed to grab our attention and shake up our preconceived ideas – for example, throwing food at an artwork (an act of communication used in recent years by climate activist groups).

Meaning can also be shared in a way that's designed to be clear, impactful, and so vital that it saves lives. During natural disasters, communication is essential to survival: emergency responders use various channels to share information with communities, including social media, radio, text messages, and face-to-face communication in the form of door-knocks or public announcements.

When we use this word "share" to describe the process of communication, we find we're able to move behind the limits of *transmission*. To share something is not to transmit but to apportion, to distribute, to co-inhabit, even to co-create; it is a practice that involves multiple contributors or participants. When I *share meaning* with you by writing these words, we are occupying the same exciting and uneasy space of potential understanding.

Beyond "understanding" – negotiating and contesting meaning

Understanding is, of course, the desired outcome of communication. When we *share meaning* with someone, we hope that person or people will understand us. If they do, we can claim that communication has taken place. In order to facilitate understanding, we follow particular rules, codes, and conventions that we've learned over time, including language and the cultural nuances that inflect upon its use.

But understanding is a *desired* outcome, not a guaranteed one. In other words, communication is also something that can go wrong. There can be failures of communication – *mis*understanding happens all the time, as does communication breakdown. Technology can both enable or disrupt our communication processes, and a failure of technology can lead to interruptions in the sharing of meaning. The problem may also be a lack of access to technologies of communication or a lack of the skills needed to use a particular technological tool.

Communication can also fail if there's a problem with *how* you try to get your message across. A communicator who is obtuse, abrupt, confusing, or offensive may limit the ability of their audience to understand their message and therefore to partake in the meaning-sharing practice they are trying to initiate.

Part of being an effective communicator, then, involves recognising the potential barriers to the sharing of meaning. An effective communicator will always ask, how can understanding be enabled in the face of these barriers?

Yet understanding does not exclusively involve *agreement*. And this is important. We can understand a message but also *disagree* with it. Understanding may be the first step in a process of unpacking, reworking, or speaking out against a message. As the German sociologist and philosopher Niklas Luhmann once wrote, "Communication can be used to indicate dissent. Strife can be sought" (1992: 255).

If you're reading this chapter because you're looking for ways to improve your communication skills, you may be interested primarily in how to achieve agreement. But in this book, we are also interested in *the strife*.

So let's build on our definition. Communication is a process through which meaning is shared, but this process is not always (or indeed, often) a smooth one. With this in mind, we might describe

communication as the act of **sharing, negotiating, and contesting meaning**. In the chapters ahead, we'll explore how communication *shapes* meaning as well as sharing it. And let's not forget where we started: if communication can indeed save the planet, we must explore the ways in which communication shapes not just *meaning* but *action*.

Ahead in Chapter 1...

Case study – the misogyny speech

CASE STUDY – THE MISOGYNY SPEECH

We'll use case studies throughout this book to explore communication-in-action, and to provide you with diverse perspectives on the relationship between communication and meaning.

Our first case study takes us back to 2012 and to a speech delivered in parliament by then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Gillard was Australia's first female prime minister. She received much media scrutiny and, at times, personalised attacks from other (male) politicians and commentators based on her gender and aspects of her personal life. In particular, the Australian media paid constant attention to her status as an unmarried, childless woman, and to her personal appearance (including her hairstyles and fashion choices). Sexist language was deployed against her by opposition politicians who referred to her as a "witch" and, at times, a "bitch" (ABC news).

The so-called "misogyny speech" was triggered when Gillard was herself accused of sexism during a parliamentary motion by opposition leader Tony Abbott, who months earlier had been photographed standing in front of an anti-Gillard sign emblazoned with the words "ditch the witch". Gillard stood up and said, "I will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. I will not. And the Government will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. Not now, not ever." She spoke for 15 minutes about misogyny and sexism in Australian politics, in a landmark moment of discursive practice and communication-in-action (or communication *as* action).



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://deakin.pressbooks.pub/communicationconcepts/?p=31#oembed-1

Julia Gillard misogyny speech voted most unforgettable Australian TV moment | *Guardian News*

The speech had immediate ripple effects: it attracted media attention, not just locally but globally, and was widely shared online – essentially, it went viral. The ABC reports that the speech prompted the Macquarie Dictionary to update its definition of the word misogyny from "hatred of women" to "entrenched prejudice against women".

The meaning shared by Gillard in this speech worked on **denotative** and **connotative** levels. At the most straightforward level (denotation), Gillard was expressing her frustration with the sexist attitudes of male politicians, particularly Abbott. What made her speech so resonant, however, were its connotations – its multiple secondary meanings. At the level of connotation, her speech communicated that:

- The Australian parliamentary system was steeped in prejudice;
- Prejudice against women should no longer have a place in Australian politics;
- Female politicians have the power to speak out about sexism;
- Parliament is a place in which such gender politics should be discussed;
- It is no longer appropriate to stay silent on gender inequality;
- Gillard herself was an empowered figure rather than a victim.

In the years since, the speech has been turned into a song (as reported in this article from *The Guardian*) and its legacy is still being discussed over a decade later, when it circulates on TikTok and is performed on stage (see this article from *The Conversation*). This tells us much about the flow of meaning in the digital age. Messages can have an afterlife – their capacity to share meaning may be extended if people spread, discuss, recall, and remake them.

This example shows us that an act of communication can intervene in events but also become an event itself. Acts of communication can enforce or challenge power structures, depending on the choices made. Much is at stake when meaning is shared, and the outcome can be the (re)construction of reality itself.

Ahead in Chapter 1...

Communication – who and where?

COMMUNICATION – WHO AND WHERE?

We have some answers to our initial question of "what is communication?" Let's now consider the "who". Who communicates? Who occupies the position of "sender" and what does it mean to be in this position?

Many students who arrive at the study of communication do so because they're interested in communication as a profession, or as an aspect of professional practice. Some of these students are already professional communicators working in industry spaces: they are journalists, graphic designers, PR practitioners, filmmakers, or social media content creators. Others have decades of experience to draw on from personal and everyday settings – they create, connect, and express themselves using a variety of media, even if they've never worked in a communication role.

We can, therefore, describe "communicator" as a professional role, and also as an everyday practice. And we can define the "sender" of a message as the person who created or distributed it, acknowledging that "senders" can be operating in a whole range of personal or professional contexts.

However, this does not mean it's always easy for us to identify the "senders" of messages, especially in a networked, digitised, commercialised media landscape.

Who, for example, is the "sender" of a news story? It may be the journalist who researched and wrote the story, who may or may not be given a byline; it may also be an editor or an editorial team, a masthead, or a large media company with its own news agenda. And things get murkier when it comes to online content that is not obviously created by or for a news outlet, but might still be received and interpreted as "news".

Similarly, who is the "sender" of a drama series on Netflix? It may be a single writer or a team of writers working together in a writers' room; it may be a showrunner, who has creative control over the series as a whole; it may be the director of a single episode or the entire crew; it may be a production company or even Netflix itself. A TV drama is still an act of communication: but who, in this case, is the communicator?

In his book on media literacy, W. James Potter writes about "the decoupling of messages from their senders" and explains, "It is difficult – sometimes impossible – to tell who the sender is and, therefore, what the sender's intentions are" (2004: 8). This is true of much of the content we encounter today, particularly that encountered online. So what happens when the source of the message is hard to find? Or when the source of the message can't be trusted? Maybe we can't trust the message *because* we can't identify the source. This is part of the lived reality of our complex media landscape today.



Photo by Nick Fewings on Unsplash. How are the technologies and practices of communication embedded in everyday life?

The spaces and places of communication

The spaces – the "where" – of communication are equally interesting. When we communicate, where are we communicating from?

Much of our communication today is *mediated* or *mediatised* – it takes place in media spaces and is facilitated, enlivened, disrupted, or recreated by digital tools. Importantly, the biggest commercial players in today's media landscape – including Alphabet (the company that owns Google) and Meta (the company that owns Facebook) are deeply invested in our communication practices. These companies do not themselves create *content* – they create the *interfaces* that shape our interaction with content, and with each other (Couldry 2012: 22). For such companies, communication can be defined as the ***business* of sharing meaning.**

But even when communication takes place in virtual spaces, such acts of communication are grounded in embodied and emplaced experiences. We do not communicate in placeless realms. Likewise, processes of communication do not occur outside the rhythms and gritty details of emplaced life.

Consider how pertinent this question of place became during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020 and 2021, many of us spent extended periods of time working or studying from home, using digital tools for many if not most of our communication experiences: email, social media, and of course, Zoom, the videoconferencing software that burst into mainstream popularity during a time when workers and students needed to engage in face-to-face communication while isolated at home.

While initially Zoom gave us insight into the bedrooms, kitchens, lounges, pets, laundry habits, and family lives of our colleagues, peers, and friends, the trend quickly became to use virtual backgrounds to obscure one's sense of place – as though we were communicating from nowhere, or from a fabricated somewhere, rather than from our couches and kitchen tables.

And then there was American scientist Gretchen Goldman. In September 2020, Goldman was interviewed on CNN, giving expert commentary on a political matter (as it happens, the appointment of then-US-President Donald Trump to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). Appearing on the live program, she epitomised working-from-home professionalism, with neat hair and makeup, a smart yellow jacket, and a carefully curated (but real) background showing a white wall with tasteful framed photographs.

The following day, Goldman posted to Twitter an image showing her actual surrounds, all that couldn't be seen beyond the screen – a makeshift desk consisting of two chairs and a coffee table; a living room strewn with children's toys; and professional attire that ceased to exist from the waist down. You can read more about her story in this article from Slate magazine. Goldman's post was captioned "Just so I'm being honest", and sparked a trend of "being honest" about one's background and surrounds while using Zoom.

This is just one expression of the way communication in digital spaces *can* be very fabricated and artificial *but* it is also grounded in real lives and real places (whether these are obscured or revealed, acknowledged or avoided).

Ahead in Chapter 1...

A more-than-human process

A MORE-THAN-HUMAN PROCESS

Throughout this book, we'll consider how technology extends our capacity to communicate and collaborate with others. The impacts and demands of technological change may be the very reason you're reading this book. Many students come to the study of communication because they are fascinated by such change or need to equip themselves to deal with it. As communicators in the 21st century, we must constantly retrain ourselves and develop the new skills needed to flourish in a media landscape that is constantly shifting under our feet.

This does not mean, however, that the study of communication is – or should be – solely focused on technology. We should be wary of **technological determinist** positions that assume technology alone shapes (determines) change. And we should not conflate communication with the tools that allow us to communicate.

In other words, communication is *more than* TikTok or Instagram. It is *more than* a press release. It is more than an app and more than a phone. All of these are channels, tools, platforms, products, or spaces within which or through which communication takes place. But what is interesting and vital about communication goes *beyond* tools and *across* platforms. If you were designing a communication strategy, you would do more than provide a list of tools, platforms, or devices – you would think carefully and deeply about tactics for reaching and engaging real people, and you would craft your message to achieve your desired impact, making choices about what to include and what to foreground.

If we think about communication only in terms of apps, platforms, and devices, we are looking in the wrong places, because communication is really about *people*. The media theorist David Gauntlett made a similar argument in 2008 when he stated that the discipline of media studies was too concerned with "media" at the expense of "people".

When we study communication, we are interested in what people *do* with technological tools and how they interact with *other people* in *everyday contexts*, even when they are communicating in mediated or virtual spaces. We should not erase people from the study of communication – indeed, in the midst of so much focus on "tech", we should reclaim people and re-place them within the emerging communication concepts that define our time.

But non-human entities can also communicate…

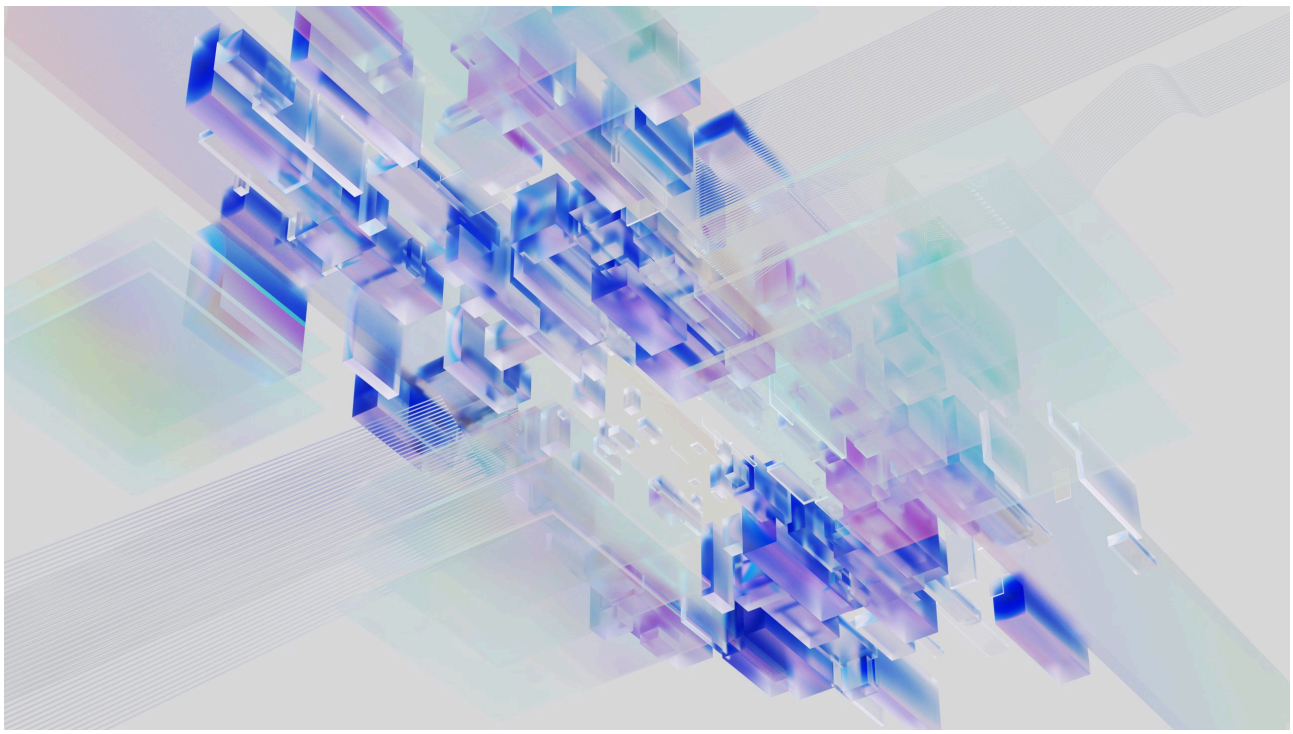


Photo by Google DeepMind from Pexels. According to Pexels, this image "visualises the input and output of neural networks and how AI systems perceive data", and is credited to DeepMind, Google's artificial intelligence research laboratory.

In June 2023, the MEAA – the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, a regulatory body for communication in Australia – raised concerns about the Generative AI tool ChatGPT writing content for a regional Victorian newspaper, the South Gippsland *Sentinel Times*. ChatGPT was even given its own byline and thereby identified as the "sender" or "communicator" of these news texts.

This example is not an outlier or an anomaly. Three years prior, in 2020, Microsoft sacked dozens of journalists from its MSN news portal and replaced them with AI software. As CNN reported in 2023, the decision resulted in errors and ethical breaches that would likely have been picked up by human editorial staff. These included news coverage of a young woman's death that asked readers to vote on how the victim died through an AI-generated poll.

News is not the only industry impacted by this blurring of the boundary between human and non-human communicators. In July 2023, the world's first human-robot press conference was held in Geneva. Human journalists asked questions of generative-AI-enhanced robot spokespeople, covering topics such as how artificial intelligence is working to solve global challenges like disease and food security, and whether AI should be regulated. Just as remarkable as the topics under discussion was the simple fact that AI-powered machines were engaging in what was previously considered to be a very *human* act of communication – giving a press conference. (You can read more about the event in this story by the ABC.)

Meanwhile, **prompt engineering** as a communication practice is increasingly relevant to thinkers, communicators, and creators of all kinds, regardless of their degree of professional communication training.

This mainstreaming of AI as a tool and the widening of its applicability has fascinating consequences

when it comes to traditional models of communication. A human using ChatGPT is certainly the "user" of a media product, and thus a type of "audience" or "receiver"; but they are also a communicator for whom the AI *becomes* a type of audience (the receiver of the person's message or prompt). Together, the human user and the AI tool collaborate as senders, producing content for others.

In a similar vein, John Gallagher has written about algorithms as audiences for the writers of online content. If you're writing or creating content for a platform like YouTube, Gallagher argues, you'll likely be thinking of your audience as the various types of people who will watch your videos – but if you're a skilled creator of online content, you'll also be thinking about how you can make sure your content is seen widely and how you can increase its circulation. In this sense, you're thinking of your audience as both groups of human people *and* the non-human processes by which online content is sorted and organised, and therefore evaluated (see Gallagher 2017; 2020).

For a long time, communication has been understood to be a *human* process, but developments today are demanding that we ask: what are the limits on *who* can communicate? And what does communication look like in the *post*human age, when AI tools can "share meaning" in an advanced and impactful way across a variety of professional and creative contexts?

Communication beyond the human

And let's not forget that non-human animals can also communicate. They do so in a variety of ways: through sound, touch, visual signs, and chemical transfers – in other words, animals communicate in ways that are *very human* and also *beyond human*. And *as* humans, our own embodied and sensory interactions with nature can be described as a type of meaning-sharing.

Our digital and mediatised communication practices, meanwhile, have deep effects on the natural world. Consider the carbon emissions of data centres, or the global accumulation of electronic waste.

So perhaps it is more apt to describe communication as a *more-than-human* process – a process that includes but also extends beyond human people.

Cultural ecologist David Abram coined the term "more-than-human world" to describe our planet as an earthly and natural place that includes humankind and our non-human kin (2012). Inspired by Abram's phrase, I am using it in a slightly different way here to demonstrate that communication is an emplaced and embodied practice that can include humans as well as non-human digital tools, and encompasses the impacts of mediated communication on the planet.

Ahead in Chapter 1...

Why this book? The usefulness of communication concepts

WHY THIS BOOK? THE USEFULNESS OF COMMUNICATION CONCEPTS

Just as communication as a practice is embedded in real places and contexts, communication *theory* is not separate from everyday life. Likewise, communication *concepts* are useful and applicable in both everyday and professional contexts.

This book is called *Communication Concepts* because it equips you with a set of thinking tools relating to communication, meaning-making, identity, and storytelling. It acknowledges the usefulness of theory – for theory provides us with a framework for understanding communication; a vocabulary for explaining and analysing communication processes and products; and a set of conceptual tools to help us in our work as both scholars and practitioners. Communication concepts are tools for sharing meaning in a complex world – they are also tools for understanding *how*, *why*, and *what happens when* meaning is shared.

In other words, the questions we should be asking about communication are not limited to "how can we do it better"? So this book invites you to adopt a researcher's mindset, and to keep your critical thinking switched on.

Switch on your critical thinking

Someone once asked me, isn't "critical thinking" really just the same as, well, *thinking*? This is a good question – the person was certainly applying their critical thinking, even if they didn't realise it – so let's be clear: **critical thinking** refers to a mindset where we take nothing for granted. When we're thinking critically about communication, nothing is off the table: nothing is too small, too ordinary, too obvious or too obscure to be analysed. Everything is open to interpretation.

Critical thinking is a higher order of thinking where we inquire, interpret, and seek evidence to support our conclusions. As communication scholars applying our critical thinking, we can take messages apart and discover what makes them work, but through this process we can also discover the consequences of the message – how people, places, and events are represented; how ideas move, how power is enacted, how common sense is formed and how it can be un-formed. This is what it means to apply an academic mindset to the study of communication.

A researcher's mindset

This book is the product of extensive research. It had to be: communication is a large and multifaceted topic. In order to write this book, I dug deeply into the many traditions of communication research. I engaged with recent scholarly work on communication in an age of digital networks, datafication, artificial intelligence, as well as social, political, and environmental crises. I also read countless works written in and

for non-academic contexts about communication as a practice, a skill and an artform. I read, watched, and listened to experts – and non-experts – talk about what *good communication* looks like. It has been a fascinating journey that, for me, has unearthed many new ways of thinking as well as dusting off old theories to find the parts that still shine. I'll share these insights in the chapters ahead.

But in the chapters ahead, you won't just be hearing from me. My co-authors of this resource are communication students taking the Master of Communication course at Deakin University. Each of them has applied their unique perspective, cultural background, industry experience, and scholarly thinking to develop a case study showing communication concepts in action. So, in the chapters ahead, you'll learn about collaboration, audiences, storytelling, identity, and meaning-making, but you'll also read about women in sport, Doctor Who fandom, anthropomorphised animals in the Philippines, and news representations of Meghan Markle – and more.

You can read this book by moving from chapter to chapter, or you can use the contents page to guide you to the sections you're most interested in. Either way, as a reader of this book, you have joined a community of scholarship: you are now part of a group of people who think deeply about communication, who are interested in the communication challenges that shape our world and who have risen to meet their own communication challenges as thinkers and practitioners.

Ahead in Chapter 1...

Chapter 1 wrap-up

CHAPTER 1 WRAP-UP

You have now finished Chapter 1.

In the next chapter, we'll consider what happens when we communicate *collaboratively* in networked spaces and work with others to create shared meanings.

Things to think about...

1. The models of communication outlined in this chapter have governed media and communication studies for decades – they've been challenged and complicated along the way, but they continue to inform the way we study communication here in Australian universities and across the Western world. However, it's important to acknowledge that they *are* Western perspectives. Does your cultural background give you a different perspective on communication?

2. Media scholar Antonio López argues that we need to study communication using new **metaphors** (2014). The traditional models of communication developed in the first half of the 20th century tend to use transmission or transport-related metaphors – a message *travels* or is *carried* to a *destination*. Often, they also use mechanical metaphors: communication is a *machine* that can *break down*. Can you think of other metaphors we might use? What happens when you think of communication using natural rather than mechanical metaphors?

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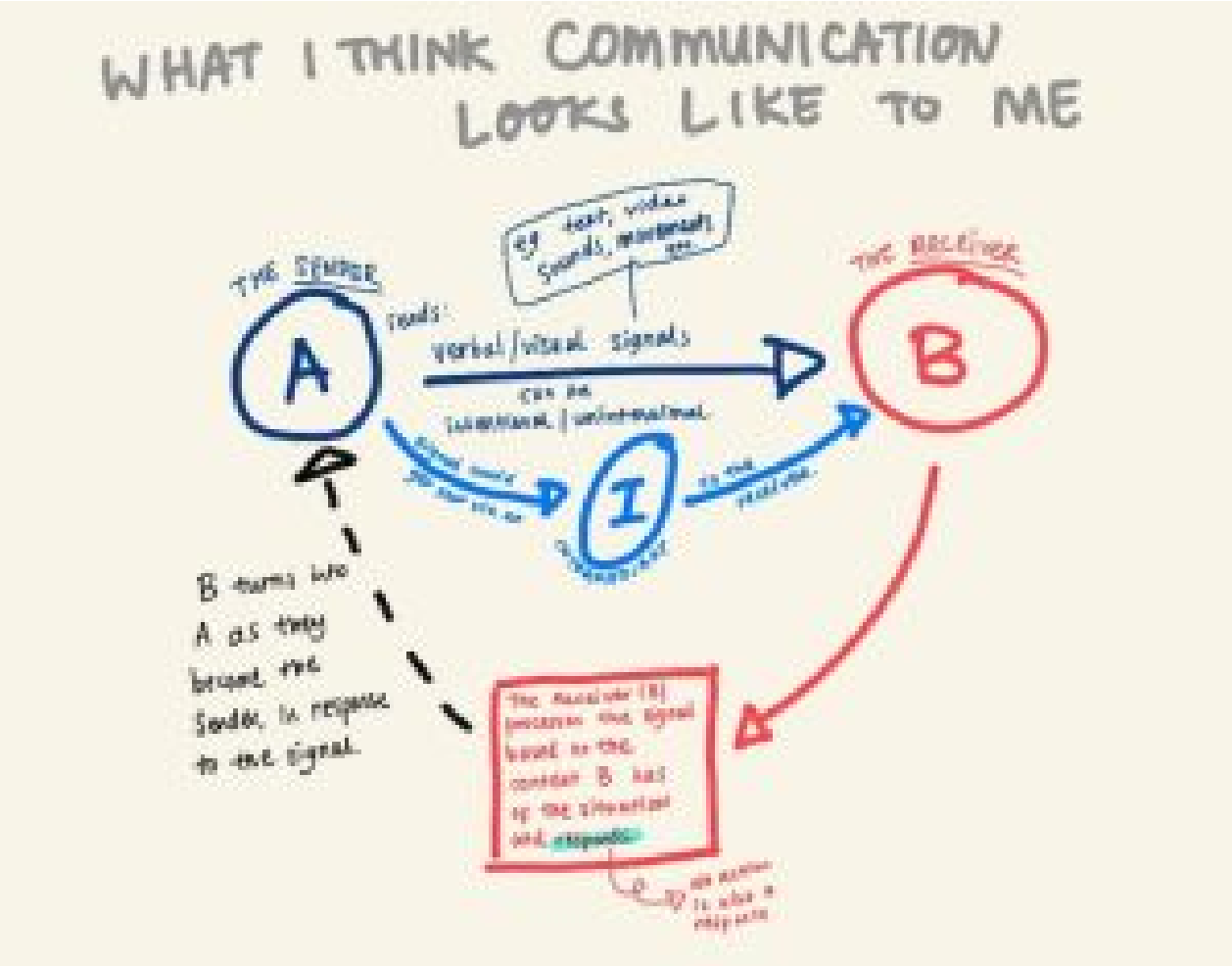
PART II

CHAPTER 2: COLLABORATION

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

In the previous chapter, we explored early models of communication. These models were developed by researchers who lived in very different worlds to us – different times and cultural contexts, informed by different concerns and priorities – but who shared with us a desire to know more about how communication works. We found that Claude Shannon's **transmission model** still informs the way we think about communication today, but doesn't fully capture the complexities of communication in a mediatised, digitised, networked world.

Often, I ask my students to create their own models of communication. (If you're in my Communication Concepts class, you probably participated in this activity last week!). Usually, I ask students to do this in small groups, using whatever materials are at their disposal. I've had many fantastic, inventive responses to this prompt. Once, a group described communication using the image of a tree, which a talented group member sketched on a large piece of paper. These students wanted to show that communication can "grow" organically. Another student participating in a Zoom class grabbed a tangled ball of yarn (she was a knitter) and used it to show that communication is a complex process involving many strands. Yet another group proposed a "baguette model" of communication, using the analogy of baking bread – crafting a message, these students argued, is like making a dough and baking a baguette which you then share with your audience, and the message only takes on meaning when it is consumed (or, literally, eaten). These students wanted to show that even when communication happens very quickly, it still involves layers of processes rather than one singular transaction.



A model of communication, produced by Master of Communication students

What comes up time and time again in this activity is the idea of **feedback**. Invariably, at least one group in the class – usually several – creates a model of communication that is cyclical or circular, and they justify their decision by stating that communication involves feedback: when you have a conversation with someone, you might initially be the "sender" of a message, but your "receiver" will give you a response, and the sender/receiver roles continue to be exchanged in an often very rapid, intrinsic, and complex process. And if you're engaging in mediated communication, feedback from your audience will similarly help you hone your message or make adjustments to your communication strategy.

When we acknowledge that communication involves feedback, we start to see that communication is a *collaborative* process. Even in a situation where the sender and receiver roles are upheld in a traditional way, the responsibility for meaning-making rests *collaboratively* between the two. As I write this chapter, I am encoding meaning into the text which you, the reader, are now decoding. Even though these two processes take place at separate points in time, their intersection involves a collaboration between you and I to create the meaning of this sentence, paragraph, and chapter. This somewhat beautiful dance between writer and reader is the only way by which this book could ever mean anything.



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay. In an age of networked communication, meanings are collaboratively produced.

Collaboration, then, is an essential part of communication. It always has been. But communication practices are becoming *increasingly* collaborative, due to the digitisation of content and the growth of online networks.

By way of example, consider how social movements collaboratively produce meaning in rapid, powerful, and creative ways across digital and non-digital spaces. The meaning of the social movement #MeToo, for instance, was collaboratively built through a series of social media posts by women sharing their experiences of sexual abuse, supporting and confirming each other's stories, and building public knowledge about crimes committed by powerful individuals within the media industries. Not only did the participants collaborate in the sharing of complex and powerful meanings about abuse, they created a shared space within which these stories could be told. And by "shared space", I don't mean a specific social media space. The movement unfolded across MySpace, Twitter (now "X"), and Facebook, as well as the real spaces of direct action and protest, but the space of #MeToo – a space within which it was right, necessary, and okay to share these stories – was collaboratively built by the communicators when they supported, endorsed, and extended each other's messages, creating a collaborative truth that was impossible for the world to ignore.

This chapter will introduce the concept of **collaboration**. It will demonstrate that collaboration is an essential skill and attribute, particularly for communication practitioners but increasingly for all professionals in a rapidly changing world of work. It will unpack the features of successful collaboration and equip you with a language for explaining the importance of collaboration in the digital age.

In this chapter...

Defining collaboration

Collective intelligence

Case study – The smartphone revolution: exploring the impact of mobile devices on communication and personal identity

Collaborative knowledge-building

Chapter 2 wrap-up

To continue reading Chapter 2, click “Next” in the bottom right corner or follow this link.

DEFINING COLLABORATION

Collaboration involves working with others to produce outputs and/or achieve shared goals. The outcome of collaboration is usually a physical product or a measurable achievement, like solving a problem or making a decision.

University students frequently find that collaboration (or a related concept like teamwork) is a key learning outcome of a particular subject or course. This is because collaboration is often considered to be a central feature of graduate employability: it's thought that students who know how to collaborate will be better positioned for success when they graduate. Consequently, university courses regularly require students to work with others in group projects.

In my experience, however, many students tend to avoid group work or otherwise worry about it. This is because collaboration is daunting. We often feel we lose control over something if we're collaborating: other people might let us down, or collaborating might mean we have to deal with divergent views or ways of working that differ from our own. This can be greatly challenging.

Nevertheless, collaboration is a crucial aspect of the production of knowledge and culture in the digital age. The outcomes of collaboration can be world-changing. To give just one example, the COVID-19 vaccines that were produced in 2021 were the result of collaborations between very large teams of experts as well as partnerships between organisations and across the public and private sectors. Knowledge-sharing between these teams and organisations ensured that the desired outcome was achieved. It's unlikely that such a complex and vital knowledge product could have emerged as the result of a solo effort.



Photo by fauxels from Pexels

Like communication itself, collaboration is something that can be done well, or poorly. In this sense, we can describe collaboration as a skill.

Commonly, collaboration is considered to be a **transferable skill**: that is, a skill we develop in one setting that we can subsequently transfer to others. For instance, a student working on a group project might hone their collaboration skills in a way that is beneficial to their future professional practice.

Collaboration also intersects with other transferable skills like communication and critical thinking – indeed, all three of these skills are often identified as vital for participation in rapidly changing work futures, but as skills and attributes they're also engaged in a complex interplay (Thornhill Miller et al. 2023). For example, one cannot necessarily collaborate with others effectively if one is not a good communicator.

Meanwhile, advances in communication technology allow us to connect, communicate, and work with others around the globe. Increasingly, then, when we collaborate we may be doing so across cultural boundaries. This means **intercultural communication** is a key skill required for effective collaboration. Drawing from our definition of communication as the sharing of meaning, we might define intercultural communication as the process through which people from different cultures create shared meanings together.

Things to think about...

What other skills or attributes help us collaborate effectively? What are the key ingredients to a successful collaboration?

But collaboration is not *just* a skill. As Keyton and co-authors point out (2008: 377-378), collaboration can be seen as both a process and a structure: yes, collaboration is something people *do*, but without a certain structure in place to support collaborative interaction, collaboration will not happen.

We can even describe collaboration as a mindset or attitude, because a group of people can work together in a way that is *not* collaborative if they do not *treat* their work as a collaboration or if there are other barriers to collaboration, such as distrust, antagonism, misunderstanding, or inequality.

Collaboration can be **synchronous** (happening in real time) or **asynchronous** (occurring at different times). In both cases, it might be enabled by digital tools and it might take place in virtual spaces. Indeed, digital tools including email, social media, videoconferencing, and even augmented or virtual reality allow collaboration to occur across temporal and geographic boundaries. Using such tools, we can collaborate with people across the world and/or people who cannot connect with us in real time. For this reason, it is becoming common for professional practitioners across various fields to collaborate in virtual teams (Swart et al. 2022).

The digitisation of content has played a crucial role in this rise of collaborative work practices. Digital tools extend and mediate our capacity to work with others. And as we saw in Chapter 1, digital technologies of communication have created a culture of speed – today, it's easy to collaborate because information can be shared quickly, even instantly. However, we need to ask: what kind of expectations (and problems) does this create? How does this culture of speed impact the collaborative production of culture, information, and knowledge? And what new skills and competencies will be needed to support collaboration in emerging and diverse professional futures?

Ahead in Chapter 2...

Collective intelligence

COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE

What we're starting to see is that collaboration is both an aspect of our transforming media landscape that we need to understand as communication scholars, and a skill that professional communicators require in order to thrive in the face of these transformations.

But if collaboration is a skill and a practice, what does *good* collaboration look like? Does it hinge on personal attributes, like honesty, or work habits like good time management? Is it more about relational qualities, like empathy? Does it require leadership? How can we collaborate effectively – what sort of qualities, attributes, mindsets, or conditions support collaboration... and what impedes it?

Google can provide us with an answer to these questions – but not necessarily through a Google search (the phrase "effective collaboration" produced 640,000,000 results when I typed it into Google, indicating that a collaboration between myself and Google's search engine would not, in this instance, be productive without additional resources and a lot of time, or at least a more thoughtful set of search terms).

In 2012, Google launched an initiative to discover the secret ingredients of a perfect team. For two years, a group of researchers studied real teams of people, conducting interviews and surveys, analysing data, in search of the key indicators of successful collaboration. The initiative was code-named Project Aristotle, a tribute to the philosopher Aristotle's maxim that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts".

These researchers found that **psychological safety** was the most important element of successful collaboration. Coined by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, psychological safety is a term that refers to a "shared belief" that risks can be taken, ideas expressed, and mistakes made without fear of the consequences (Gallo 2023). A sense of shared meaning and impact was also identified as a key ingredient of successful teamwork, alongside dependability, structure and clarity (Duhigg 2016).

In undertaking this project, Google was responding to workplace trends that saw workers across all sectors engaging more frequently than ever before in collaborative activities. But despite this trend towards collaborative work, we often – particularly in Western cultures – tend to value individual achievement more highly than collective achievement. For example, when you hear the words "knowledge" and "intelligence", what springs to mind? For many, these words conjure examples of *individual* great thinkers (Einstein, Bill Gates, or maybe even Aristotle himself). There is an equally strong perception that it's *harder* to achieve goals in a team than individually. This is why many of us tend to feel nervous or daunted about group projects.



Photo by Antoni Shkraba from Pexels. Is this what collaboration looks like?

What is collective intelligence?

Pierre Lévy's research on **collective intelligence** gives us a reason to be less daunted and more optimistic about the outcome of group projects. Lévy is a French cultural theorist and media scholar who first wrote about "collective intelligence" in 1994. Challenging the traditional notion that intelligence is an individual attribute, Lévy argued that as *individuals* there are limits to our knowledge and expertise, but as *communities* we can pool our resources, work collaboratively towards a common goal, and produce an output or achieve an outcome beyond our individual limits (Lévy 1997, 2013).

You've probably experienced this phenomenon yourself. As individuals, we participate in many communities – as family members, citizens, workers, fans, members of social networks, members of cultural groups – through which knowledge may be shared and complex problems tackled by tapping into the collective wisdom of many.

Importantly, collective intelligence doesn't mean that individual knowledge and expertise do not matter. On the contrary, collective intelligence requires that individuals develop their own voice and expertise so that they can contribute meaningfully to the shared production of knowledge and culture.

Nor does the term imply or require a future-focus at the expense of historical perspectives. Indeed, when writing about collective intelligence Lévy reflects on the way we as individuals inherit and benefit from the wisdom of those who have come before us in the societies and communities to which we

belong. Knowledge, he says, is "accumulated and developed" through "long intergenerational chains of transmission" (2013: 100). Collective intelligence therefore involves collaborative communication across temporal and generational as well as geographic and cultural boundaries.

Think about the various ways you might collaborate with those who have come before you. In academia, this is very pertinent: when we write academic essays, we engage with and interpret the ideas of writers and thinkers from the past as well as scholars of the present. When academic work is published in the form of a journal article, book, or chapter, the author participates in a peer-review process where their own ideas are extended and the quality of their work assured. As students, you draw from these peer-reviewed published works. You respond to and interpret existing ideas, and develop your own voice and arguments in order to productively contribute to existing research on the topics that interest you. In other words, as academic *communicators* we place ourselves in dialogue with a scholarly community, drawing from and also contributing to the collective intelligence through which ideas come to matter.

Wikipedia and collaboration

What's so interesting about collective intelligence is that it is not *new*: as far as we know, humans have worked in collaborative groups to solve problems across the many thousands of years that constitute our history – and yet the notion of collective intelligence is also one with emerging relevance.

For an example of the way collective intelligence flourishes in the digital age, we need look no further than Wikipedia. Created by a community of knowledge experts, Wikipedia describes itself as "a free online encyclopedia that anyone can edit" consisting of "freely editable content" that is "written collaboratively by largely anonymous volunteers". The digital resource was created in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, who were trying to publish a free encyclopedia – when their project failed, they shared the content online using "wiki" technology, which allows content to be collaboratively stored and modified. Users began to add to and edit the content, and there was exponential growth in the site (see Lih 2004 for an interesting account of the site's early development).

Lévy himself points out that Wikipedia exemplifies the concept of collective intelligence in that "authors, readers and editors exchange roles to further the dissemination of knowledge" (2013: 100), while Jenkins (2007) describes Wikipedia as less a product than an "ongoing process by which its community pools information, debates what knowledge matters, and vets competing truth claims".

If you've used Wikipedia before – no doubt you have – consider *how* you have used it and *why* it has been valuable to you. Perhaps you use it because it's easily accessible, a fast way to access knowledge. Maybe you've been told *not* to use it in an academic context, because it is not a scholarly, peer reviewed resource – in which case, perhaps you consider it to be a first port of call in your search for knowledge, or a means of verifying information and collecting ideas that you'll research further in more formal academic ways.

It may be that you find Wikipedia useful precisely *because* it's collaboratively created and therefore contains a perspective that transcends individual bias. As digital literacy expert Mike Caulfield points out in his book on fact-checking:

> "*Wikipedia* is broadly misunderstood by faculty and students alike. While *Wikipedia* must be approached with caution, especially with articles that are covering contentious subjects or evolving events, it is often the best source to get a consensus viewpoint on a subject. Because the *Wikipedia* community has strict rules about sourcing facts to reliable sources, and because authors must adopt a neutral point of view, its articles are often the best available introduction to a subject on the web." (Caulfield 2017)

Of course, the collaborative nature of Wikipedia as an unfolding text may also give you reason to feel wary of the information you find there, which is fluid enough to change very rapidly and can be manipulated by others to suit particular agendas. You may employ your digital literacy – the set of knowledge and competencies that allows you to use digital tools to access, share, and create information – in order to engage effectively with this particular resource.

Collaborative futures?

Wikipedia has been part of communication and culture for over two decades now. And while it remains an important example of collective intelligence in action, we can also turn our attention to the emerging forms that collaboration takes as human/digital interfaces evolve.

For example: what does collective intelligence mean in the age of AI?

Consider what happens when you ask an AI tool like ChatGPT to help you solve a problem or create a product. When you collaborate with the AI, you're employing your prompt engineering skills – that is, you're crafting a message that can be interpreted effectively and productively by a generative AI model. If you're a skilled communicator and if you're adept at such human/non-human collaboration, you'll be more likely to achieve the results you want. But what kind of collective intelligence are you creating, drawing from, or participating in?

Researchers at the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence would see your interaction with the AI as a form of "augmented collective intelligence", which they define as networks of people collaborating with AI-powered machines (Supermind.design 2022). These networks are already part of our everyday lives: Wikipedia itself is one, as are YouTube, Reddit, and Bitcoin. Arguably, they'll become all the more important in the future – perhaps such "augmented collective intelligence" and networked collaboration across human/machine boundaries will come to replace more traditional forms of top-down communication.

Things to think about...

So far in this book, we've thought a lot about change – and we'll continue to do so in the chapters ahead. I've described our communication landscape as rapidly changing and constantly evolving. You've probably heard similar language used by others.

But how *exactly* is communication changing and what facilitates and drives such change? It's important to be specific, because change is not a simple process.

Consider how mobile phones have reshaped the way people communicate. List as many developments as possible that are connected to the rise of mobile communication.

Do you think mobile phones have increased our capacity for collaboration?

Now read the next section, where Master of Communication student Diana Ortega Molina reflects on her relationship with her phone.

Ahead in Chapter 2...

Case study – the smartphone revolution: exploring the impact of mobile devices on communication and personal identity

THE SMARTPHONE REVOLUTION: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF MOBILE DEVICES ON COMMUNICATION AND PERSONAL IDENTITY.

Diana Ortega Molina

In 2007 we witnessed a transformative moment in the history of communication with the introduction of the iPhone. This groundbreaking device seamlessly combined the functions of a phone, a music player, and an Internet communication tool into one sleek package.

Beyond its practical applications, the iPhone has had a profound influence on computer-mediated communication (CMC). Emoticons, GIFs, and memes have emerged as influential tools, enriching digital conversations with visual and expressive elements that transcend traditional text-based communication. These new forms of expression have become part of our digital conversations, allowing us to convey emotions, humour, and cultural references with ease.

Take, for instance, the "Face with Tears of Joy" emoji which was named Word of the Year in 2015 by Oxford Dictionaries (Oh 2015). These symbols, now widely recognised, serve as a means to communicate emotions and expressions that are typically conveyed through facial expressions and body language in in-person conversations (Dresner & Herring 2010).

Mobile apps like Instagram and TikTok, which reach billions of users daily (Dixon 2023) have played a pivotal role in the rise of online personas. Social media channels have given people the tools to curate their online identities meticulously, resulting in the development of online personas (see Chapter 6).

Whether it's a conscious or subconscious effort, we craft digital identities on platforms that align with our desired self-image. This process involves selecting the most flattering photos, sharing specific aspects of our lives, and even using filters and editing tools to enhance our online presence. In this digital age, our online personas have become a part of how we present ourselves to the world, shaping the way others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves.

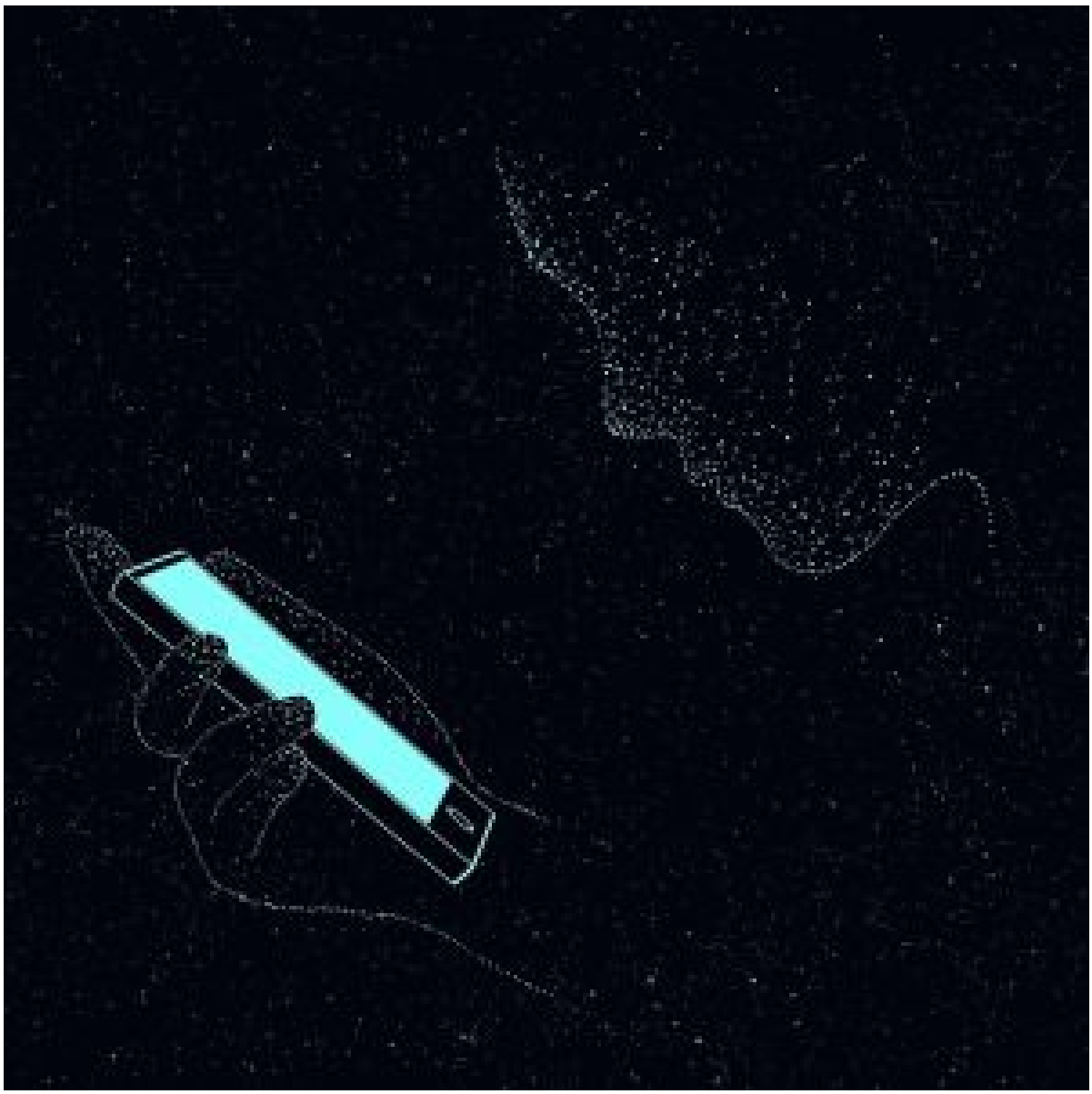


Image by 愚木混株 Cdd20 from Pixabay

The rise of smart devices has also facilitated our ability to connect with individuals who share similar interests, values, and experiences. This ability to find and engage with like-minded individuals has given rise to niche communities and subcultures that might not have otherwise existed. As described by Brabham (2013), crowdsourcing is a collaborative process in which individuals contribute their knowledge, skills, and resources to achieve a common goal. Crowdsourcing has found applications in various fields, from science and innovation to social activism and humanitarian efforts. Mobile devices have only made it easier for individuals worldwide to participate in crowdsourcing efforts, contributing their individual knowledge and resources.

Platforms like Reddit, Discord, and GitHub have emerged as central hubs for collaborative efforts, providing spaces for the exchange of ideas, resources, and real-time feedback. Take for example The GameStop stock surge a unique event in which the stock price of the video game retailer GameStop suddenly skyrocketed in early 2021 (Jones, 2021). This surge was primarily driven by individual investors

from a Reddit forum called WallStreetBets, who organised to buy GameStop stock and drive up its price, causing large losses for some big hedge funds that had bet against the stock. This event which was facilitated by computer-mediated communications can be considered a symbol of collective intelligence and decentralised decision-making.

Mobile devices have also revolutionised the way we access and consume information. News and information are no longer limited to traditional media outlets but are now readily available through mobile apps, podcasts, social media, and online platforms. This democratisation of information has given individuals the power to be active participants in shaping public discourse, challenging traditional gatekeepers of information, and amplifying diverse voices and unique perspectives.

For example, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which began as a hashtag on X (formerly known as Twitter), has evolved into a global phenomenon known around the world, pushing forward conversations of racial injustice and systematic racism. Since the inception of the BLM movement, numerous other examples of computer-mediated communications have helped change public discourse by driving social change and putting the audience in the driver's seat of meaning-making processes.

Mobile devices have undeniably exerted a profound influence on the realms of communication and personal identity. They have not only enhanced the quality of digital interactions but have also played a pivotal role in crafting our online personas and facilitated collaborative endeavours. In today's world, smartphones have evolved into indispensable instruments, granting us instant connections to people and information that we've never previously had access to. This accessibility has ushered in fresh opportunities across various domains such as business, education, and personal development. As a result, individuals and communities now possess the capacity to transcend geographical constraints, forging connections on a scale that was once unimaginable.

About the author

Diana Ortega Molina is a dynamic marketing professional with 8 years of experience in branding, communications, and marketing across diverse industries, including technology and impact enterprises. Originally from Mexico and now residing in sunny Queensland, Diana is a first-generation immigrant who brings a unique blend of perspectives, honed through her personal and professional experiences in London and Australia. Her passion for working with purpose-driven organisations inspires her to deliver creative and comprehensive marketing and communication strategies.

Ahead in Chapter 2...

Collaborative knowledge-building

COLLABORATIVE KNOWLEDGE-BUILDING

This book takes a collaborative approach to communication studies. It does so in two ways:

1. The book is the result of a collaboration between myself and a group of students who have each contributed a case study based on research conducted during their Master of Communication studies. (You met one of these contributors, Diana, in the previous section). We have used our collective intelligence to produce something greater than the sum of its parts: an exploration of communication from a range of different cultural and professional perspectives.

2. As an open textbook, this book lends itself to collaboration because it is licensed in a way that allows – and encourages – modification. It is an **open educational resource**, or OER, which UNESCO defines as "educational resources... that are openly available for use by educators and students, without an accompanying need to pay royalties or license fees" and that incorporate "a license that facilitates reuse, and potentially adaptation" (Butcher et al. 2011: 5). The ability to remix or adapt content is a key aspect of OER, and this enables collaboration, as Butcher et al explain:

> "At its most effective, creating and sharing OER is essentially about working together towards a common cause, whether this be within a single faculty or across a global network. Sharing materials that others can adapt and use recognizes the value inherent in team work and the improvements in thinking that will emerge from such collaboration." (2011: 45)

By publishing this textbook under a Creative Commons license, we are participating in a broader "open" movement that advances universal access to knowledge and culture. And while I'm writing these words as I collate the manuscript in late 2023, I'm aware that the knowledge shared here will be adapted and reused by others. I have also consulted other open textbooks and Creative Commons-licenced material while researching and writing the book.

In their strategy for 2021-2025, the non-profit organisation Creative Commons states that open sharing "fosters creativity, innovation and collaboration, thereby enabling progress in addressing global challenges, especially when it facilitates connections between *people with diverse perspectives*" (Pearson et al. 2020: 3, my emphasis). In my mind, it is therefore deeply appropriate to write an open textbook about *communication*, which is such a complex and multifaceted concept that it does indeed benefit from "diverse perspectives". My co-authors – all students in the postgraduate unit ACX701 Communication Concepts – bring knowledge to this project that is far beyond my own, drawn from their industry experience as well as

their cultural backgrounds. The collaborative aspects of writing this book have allowed us to explore communication concepts in action but also to trouble these concepts, to think about their limits.



Photo by Kei Scampa from Pexels

Collaboration and learning

In this chapter, we've seen that collaboration is deeply part of our communication practices and processes. But collaboration is also an important aspect of *how we learn*. Scholars in the learning sciences have recognised that knowledge is discursively and collaboratively constructed through acts of communication – a process referred to as "**collaborative knowledge-building**" (Scardamalia and Bereiter 2006). From this perspective, knowledge is a "product of social communication", as Stahl puts it (2000: 72).

There is some resonance here with our definition of communication as the sharing of meaning. But as Hmelo-Silver and Barrows contend, knowledge-building discourse "is more than knowledge sharing. In this kind of discourse, participants engage in constructing, refining, and transforming knowledge" (2008: 49). Similarly, when we communicate we are not just *sharing* something – we are collaboratively *transforming* meaning and knowledge.

Collaborative knowledge-building is also an apt descriptor for the way information is shared and circulated across media channels. For example, Lacassin and co-authors (2020) use the concept of collaborative knowledge-building to describe the way information can be rapidly shared, developed, and transformed by teams of scientists interacting on Twitter in the aftermath of natural disasters. These

researchers looked particularly at two earthquake-related events occurring in Indonesia and the Indian Ocean in 2018. They analysed Twitter threads about the events to show how the sharing of data by scientists and citizens led to rapid co-building of knowledge. In both cases, exchanges of information between seismologists and other specialists helped a knowledge community appraise and understand each event, its location, size, geographic origin, and after-effects. Journalists quoted these Twitter threads when reporting on the events, and there was a rapid interaction between journalists and scientists to ensure facts were checked and accuracy was achieved (Lacassin et al. 2020: 134).

This example is a noteworthy one. As a site of collaborative knowledge-building, Twitter (now "X") is a tool for the public dissemination of scientific information, as well as a source of news for journalists – importantly, it is also a space where professional and citizen scientists can interact. It also seems that, where one message could misinform (spread false or inaccurate information), collaborative communication allows for information to be confirmed, checked, refuted, developed, and for consensus to be built.

Ahead in Chapter 2...

Chapter 2 wrap-up

CHAPTER 2 WRAP-UP

You have now finished Chapter 2.

This chapter has explored collaboration and the increasingly collaborative ways in which we share meaning. It has laid some important groundwork for the chapters ahead.

In Chapter 3, we'll look at audiences, who are, of course, collaborators in communicational processes. And when we come to Chapter 8, this book's final chapter, we'll return to some of the ideas explored here about the participatory and interactive nature of communication.

Things to think about...

This chapter has mentioned group projects, OER, Wikipedia, fact-checking, and Twitter. Can you think of other examples of collaborative knowledge-building or collective intelligence?

These days, we can collaborate with others very quickly. What does a culture of speed do to collaboration? Can you think of positive and negative ways in which speed impacts our ability to collaborate?

Conduct a Google image search using the word "collaboration". What sort of results do you get? Do you find that collaboration is being depicted in a positive or negative light? What other connotations are present? How does this align with your own understanding – and experiences – of collaboration?

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PART III

CHAPTER 3: AUDIENCES

APPROACHING AUDIENCES

Audiences have been "of interest" to researchers for a long time. This long history of audience research has laid the foundations for work undertaken today by professionals in various fields – advertisers, digital marketers, campaigners, content creators of all kinds, as well as academics and scholars. Many who come to the study and/or practice of communication find audiences the most fascinating aspect of the discipline: they are the human part of communication, which makes them interesting but also volatile, challenging, and complex.

Looking at the history of audience studies, the media theorist Sonia Livingstone (2018) identifies a sort of conceptual tug-of-war between two points of focus: media power, and audience agency. The emphasis, she argues, has changed over time. In the first half of the 20th century, during times of war and propaganda, audiences were depicted as vulnerable and audience research was driven by concerns about the misuse of media by powerful forces. The balance began to shift in the second half of the 20th century, when audiences became of interest to communication researchers for the ways they actively used and responded to media messages.

So what about today? Audiences are more important and fascinating than ever before, and audience-based research is flourishing. But today, Livingstone argues, the balance has shifted somewhat and media power is once again of concern, often at the expense of a focus on *real people-as-audiences*.

In particular, concerns about **misinformation** (which we'll look at in Chapter 8) have led to renewed worries that audiences are vulnerable and easily manipulated. Changing media ownership patterns and the rise of "big tech" and media conglomerates have led to renewed explorations of media power – and not surprisingly: if most media content is owned and controlled by a handful of global companies, why should we not be worried about the ability of these owners to set the agenda and influence public opinion? The rise of big data, in turn, has led to a focus on the digital traces that audiences leave behind, rather than their everyday lives and practices – this is one of the core observations Livingstone makes in her paper.

So: a word of caution as we begin this chapter. Audience studies is fraught with tension and riddled with complexities. Indeed, writing a chapter on "audiences" makes me feel like I'm stepping into a crowded room where many voices are conversing loudly, and I've been tasked with giving a thorough account of everything that is currently being said and has *ever* been said in this impossible room.



Image by Gabiel Doti from Pixabay

All topics with rich and complex academic histories can be difficult to distil and explain clearly. But audiences are different. They are different because *nearly everyone* is interested in audiences. That is to say, audiences *matter* to nearly everyone. And because nearly everyone is interested in audiences, the perspectives on what it means to be an audience (and what it means to successfully reach and engage one) are almost endless.

In other words, audiences themselves are a site of struggle over what it means to communicate *well*. And they always have been. Across history, audiences have been the subject of deep thinking about the impacts and processes of communication, and the meaning of "audience" has been fought over by stakeholders with diverse, competing agendas.

In this chapter, we'll untangle some of this complexity and explore different ways of looking at, thinking about, and working with audiences. We'll consider what audiences mean, and to who, at the intersection of communication theory and practice. We'll take something of a journey through cultural studies, the encoding/decoding model, and diverse practices of decoding in the digital age. But we'll start in an unexpected place...

In this chapter...

"Be a good listener"

Decoding

Defining and measuring audiences

Audiences and change

The news and its audiences

Case study – algorithmic news consumption

Case study – my transformative journey as a news consumer

Chapter 3 wrap-up

To continue reading Chapter 3, click "Next" in the bottom right corner or **follow this link**.

"BE A GOOD LISTENER"

In 1907, an American woman named Josephine Turck Baker published a book called *The Art of Conversation: 12 Golden Rules*. Baker was a novelist and playwright, and the author of several books about communication (including usage guides and grammar textbooks). She was born in 1858 and lived for much of her life in Evanston, Illinois. According to the Evanston Women's History Project, she was a strong supporter of the local arts and her home was a social hub for the Evanston community.

Published well over a century ago, *The Art of Conversation* has experienced an extraordinary afterlife. In 2023, it is available in multiple formats – print, online, audiobook – and can be purchased on platforms like Amazon or freely downloaded via the digital archive Project Gutenberg. While not known as a key thinker in communication studies, Baker was evidently an extraordinary communicator with the ability to write a non-fiction, instructional book (what we might even call today a "self-help book") that endured despite the passage of time and the evolution of culture.

In her book, as the title suggests, Baker lays out 12 rules for artful conversation. Each is practical and, perhaps surprisingly given the book's age, relatable – none more so than Rule Number 8: "Be a good listener". Baker explains that an artful conversationalist will not "talk on", and is skilled not just in speaking but in allowing others to speak. She insists that we "find something of interest in the conversation of others" as well as crafting our own strategies for entertaining them and holding their attention.

If you, as someone interested in communication in the 21st century, were to compile a list of 12 "rules" for artful conversation, you would probably mention *listening* too. It comes up time and time again when I ask my students what "good" communication involves. We know, as did Baker, that good practices of face-to-face communication involve a degree of responsiveness to others. An effective conversationalist will adjust their tone and the subject of their speech in response to subtle (or not so subtle) cues from the listener. They will also become listeners themselves and attend to the speech of their conversational partner. In a dynamic conversation, this happens in a very rapid and complex way as both speakers listen, adapt, and respond to each other. Such a process may be very conscious and intentional, as when we engage in artful and strategic conversation with a stranger at a networking event, or it may be more naturalised, as when two friends converse in a way that is pleasurable because they are so familiar with each other's communicational patterns.



Image by Giuseppe Milo, CC BY, from Wikimedia commons

Baker's text is replete with hidden ideas about cultural capital: it tells us much about who had access, in the early 1900s, to the knowledge and competencies that enabled artful conversation – and what sorts of power that unlocked. But we can also detect in her book an overwhelming sense that communicators should be attentive to the needs of their listeners. Baker's Rule Number 8 speaks to the importance of **the audience** and the importance of *knowing* one's audience. And the audience pops up again and again in her book, although she never uses the word. Many of Baker's other rules are geared towards making the conversation more pleasurable, clear, or valuable to the listener. To be an artful conversationalist, she tells us, one must "avoid unnecessary details" so as not to bore the listener; one must not interrupt or contradict, or do all the talking; one should choose subjects of mutual interest, be tactful, and use storytelling to engage your listener (a topic we'll investigate more fully in the next chapter).

Baker's book may have been about conversation, specifically, but what she produced with her "12 Golden Rules" was a model of communication. Comparing Baker's "12 rules" to Claude Shannon's transmission model (which we explored in Chapter 1), we might notice that both models are concerned with the **encoding and decoding** processes of communication – that is, with *what the sender does* and *what the receiver does*. Both models include **reception** as a vital component. Whether we call them receivers, audiences, decoders, or listeners – or something else – these people on 'the other end' of our communication efforts are central to the success, effectiveness, or artfulness of the process; they *matter*.

Something to think about...

Why is it hard to engage audiences today? What are the barriers to audience engagement that are unique to the digital age? Can you think of any barriers or challenges from Josephine Baker's time (the early 1900s) that might still be applicable today?

Ahead in Chapter 3...

Decoding

DECODING

Many decades after Josephine Baker, a cultural theorist named Stuart Hall wrote about encoding and decoding in a way that upended communication studies. Hall was a Jamaican scholar who lived and worked in England, where he was instrumental in the rise of cultural studies. Along with other cultural studies scholars, Hall showed us that audiences were not just objects to be engaged, entertained, or manipulated – they were *real people* worth talking to, worth watching and interviewing and studying for the various unique ways they received messages, reworked meaning, and embedded communication practices in their everyday lives.

In his 1973 article "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse", Hall proposed that when messages are made, they are encoded with meaning. In this encoding process, there is an attempt to fix meaning and to limit the ways that audiences might respond to the message. However, as audiences we interpret messages differently depending on our identity, our life experiences, our social and cultural contexts – and so when messages are received, they are **decoded**. And at this decoding stage, audiences adopt different reading positions: they might agree with the intended meaning of the message, but they might also oppose, contest, rework, or negotiate it.

Hall's model, proposed within the context of broadcast television but applicable to a range of communication practices even today, was an important step in recognising that neither audiences nor communicators hold all the power. Audiences are active producers of meaning, but they don't read messages in any which way. Instead, meaning is a process of negotiation and sometimes of struggle between texts, audiences, and communicators.

This has implications for how we see the effects of communication, which we'll discuss in a later chapter. As Hall puts it, a message isn't just a tap on the kneecap, something that provokes a simple and singular response. If audiences interpret messages in such multiple ways, and sometimes reject them altogether, then the effects of communication – if there are any – become very complex and themselves multiple.



Photo by Anton Maksimov 5642.su on Unsplash

"The Dress"

In 2015, one year after Hall's death, we were treated to a spectacular reminder of the idea that meaning does not reside in a message, but is actively created by the audience. "The Dress" was a piece of viral media – a photograph of a dress taken at a wedding in Scotland and shared via a Tumblr post. This photographic image captured our collective imagination and was rapidly shared online for the simple reason that viewers could not agree on its colour: some believed the dress was blue and black, others saw white and gold.

Years later, the science behind this viral phenomenon was explained. According to neuroscientist Pascal Wallisch (2017) in a theory published in the *Journal of Vision*, our perception of colour is related to how we perceive the effects of lighting: when lighting conditions can't be fully determined, the brain makes assumptions and fills in the gaps. Whether we saw the dress as black and blue or white and gold was dependent upon the brain's assumption that the photograph was taken in light or shadow, indoors or outdoors, in daylight or at night.

At the time of the photograph's propulsion into viral stardom, though, what made viewers gasp and promptly share the image was the way it shook our perception of the 'truth' of colour. Surely, we told ourselves, colour is already *in* an image – we as viewers or audiences don't create it. Nevertheless, we could stand side-by-side with a friend, family member, colleague, or neighbour, looking at the same photograph, and perceive or interpret it *in different ways*.

Best remembered as a viral phenomenon that once "broke the Internet", then, The Dress is also a beautiful reminder that humans usually (and mistakenly) assume that others see the world in the same way as them. And perhaps most pertinently, while the decoding of the colours sparked global attention at the time, the image has since been swept up in various remix practices and actively decoded to produce new meanings (which you can explore on the Know Your Meme entry for 'What colour is this dress?').

This example shows us decoding in action. You can probably think of other, similar examples (many of my past students have mentioned the sonic meme Yanny/Laurel).

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://deakin.pressbooks.pub/communicationconcepts/?p=71#oembed-1

"Yanny or Laurel: who heard it best?", The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age

What such examples remind us is that we need to understand how decoding works in digital and networked contexts. Just as Baker urged conversationalists to be attentive listeners, today's communicators must attend to the needs, experiences, and behaviours of audiences dispersed across digital platforms. We may be experts at *encoding* a message to maximum effect, but arguably, such skill means little if we don't understand how *decoding* works and therefore can't imagine or predict how people will respond.

Decoding in digital contexts

Much fascinating research in the field of communication studies is today concerned with new practices of decoding and new iterations of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model. Adrienne Shaw (2017) gives the example of "modding": the practice of creating modifications to digital games. Modding, Shaw argues, can be understood through the lens of Hall's model as a resistant reading of a game – a practice through which meaning is actively (re)created by the player.

Elsewhere, in her research on teenagers and their media use, danah boyd points out that knowledge of encoding and decoding practices allows young people to gain agency in virtual environments that do not otherwise afford them much power. The teenagers in boyd's study encoded their social media messages in particular, strategic ways, understanding that their intended audience would have the cultural knowledge to decode the message, while others would not, and thereby protecting their privacy even in a public virtual space (boyd 2014: 68).

We also need to acknowledge that the boundaries between encoding and decoding have been shaken in the decades since Hall proposed his model. Both modders and social media users are examples of what media theorist Axel Bruns terms "**produsers**" (2008) – people who both produce and consume media

content. The term "produser" captures the hybrid position audiences occupy in age of networked and digital communication.

I can't help but wonder what Josephine Baker would have thought of this term "produser". In a conversation – especially an "artful" one – the participants occupy produser roles, in the sense that they are both producing and consuming the "content" or "products" of the conversation; when Baker instructs us to "be a good listener", she is acknowledging the interchange of roles in a conversation, and it is interesting that this interchange – which was obscured in the so-called **broadcast model** of communication, whereby information simply travels in one direction from sender to receiver – has resurfaced in the digital age.

Consider, for example, the concept of **social listening**, which has emerged as an important research tool for communicators. Social listening is the analysis of communication patterns and trends to develop knowledge that will benefit a particular brand, client, or stakeholder. This knowledge helps communicators better know their audience. The term *listening* is used figuratively here, as though the researchers could physically visit the halls and parlours of online communication and silently participate in the conversations as they unfold. Nevertheless, the use of the term "listening" (which recalls Baker's eighth golden rule) acknowledges that audiences are communicators themselves whose interactions are worth attending to.

Stuart Hall is recognised as a key thinker in communication studies, while Josephine Baker was not a scholar and is not widely known in the discipline today, even though her book experienced remarkable longevity. So what do Baker and Hall have in common? Their writings about communication centralise the audience. To a certain extent, both were concerned with "decoding". However, Baker's primary concern was how the communicator might strategically guide the audience's (or listener's) response in order to enhance their prowess as a conversationalist – she was interested in the audience as an object to be activated, engaged, and retained. Hall, in turn, was interested in power, interpretation, and the acts of resistance that lead to misunderstanding and/or the production of (new) meaning. Interestingly, both perspectives have currency in the digital age.

Ahead in Chapter 3...

Defining and measuring audiences

DEFINING AND MEASURING AUDIENCES

Audiences are vital participants in communication processes. They are the person, or people, *with whom meaning is shared*, whether that sharing process is intentional or unintentional, strategic or accidental, persuasive or controversial, wildly successful or a demonstrative failure. Without them, communication cannot be said to have taken place.

We've already seen that a good conversationalist will also be "a good listener" and think about their audience. This holds true for most, if not all, relationships between communicators and their audiences, in both **synchronous** and **asynchronous** situations. A face-to-face conversation is an example of synchronous, or real-time, communication. This allows us to be responsive to our listener and adjust our communication strategy in the moment.

Consider how this ability to connect with and respond to your listener changes when the conversation is mediated by a technological interface such as Zoom. Perhaps the Internet connection is poor, or the person prefers to keep their camera off, limiting your capacity to gauge their reactions.

Now consider how the ability to know one's audience transforms again during asynchronous communication. Your audience is not present before you; they are elsewhere, and your capacity to *know* them – let alone adjust your message in response to their actions – is greatly diminished, or at least complicated. Asynchronous communication produces a gap between sender and receiver, and much professional communication practice today involves leaping or reaching across this gap. And the more information we can gather about our audience(s), the better we will be able to make this leap.



Image by kiquebg from Pixabay

Imagining one's audience is therefore a crucial component of successful communication. Defining "audience" in his *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts*, John Hartley writes that the concept is a means by which "an unknowable group can be imagined" (2004: 11). Hartley also points out that identifying an audience often means homogenising it. Whenever we imagine a target audience, we are in danger of ignoring the differences within that group.

But skilled communicators today need to address and understand **diverse audiences**. For example, a creator of online content needs to consider whether their messages meet the needs of audiences with physical, sensory, or intellectual disabilities, and whether their language is inclusive and respectful of diverse cultural groups. In a different context, the writers of a Netflix series need to consider diverse audiences but also the diverse ways their program will be watched: piecemeal or binged; sporadic or committed; at home or while commuting; as soon as the program drops or many months later.

Audience research and measurement tools

A range of tools can be used by communicators to measure and track audience behaviour. Some of these measurement tools have been used for decades, and these exist alongside emerging tools – indeed, there are more ways than ever before to measure what audiences *do* when they interact with communication content.

Let's take the example of a documentary filmmaker trying to measure how audiences have responded to

their latest film. They may look at box office figures – the revenue generated from ticket sales at cinemas – which have traditionally been used as a measurement of the popularity or success of a film. Test screenings with focus groups may help the filmmaker understand the appeal of their film and can be especially useful for marketing purposes. If the film is distributed online, digital measurement tools can be used to gather a range of information about the number of times it is viewed, the amount of time viewers have spent watching it, where people are accessing the video from and where those people go *after* watching it. The filmmaker might receive feedback in the form of ratings, reviews, comments, likes, and shares. Eye-tracking can provide specific information about where audience attention is placed when they watch the film. And a sentiment analysis can provide the filmmaker within information about how audiences are feeling about the film and whether its reception has been positive or negative.

Professional communicators are not the only ones with skin in the game when it comes to understanding audiences. Researchers in academic contexts have long studied audiences as a means of better understanding communication processes, products, and effects. Interviews, focus groups, and surveys are all research methods that can deliver insights into the behaviours, practices, and attitudes of audiences. **Reception analysis** is the study of how audiences respond to and interpret media texts. **Netnography** is the study of online communities, while **autoethnography** is the study of one's own position and experiences within culture. Each of these methods has value in the context of audience studies. And each has its limits. But importantly, when we engage in audience research using one or a combination of these methods and approaches, we *avoid making assumptions* about who audiences are and what they do with communication content. Instead, we uncover evidence that can be used to support our claims.

Reach and attention

Earlier, I used the analogy of reaching across the gap between sender and receiver to describe the process of imagining one's audience. Fittingly, the term **audience reach** has been used for decades to refer to the number of people (or households) exposed to a message. OzTAM, Australia's television audience measurement body, defines "reach" as the number of unique viewers who have seen at least one minute of a program.

In a broader digital media context, the term "reach" is typically used to identify the percentage of a target audience who sees (or hears) a message. For example, the Australian government recently stated that distributing content on platforms like YouTube and TikTok would allow Australia's national broadcaster, the ABC, to improve "reach" with younger viewers.

Facebook, meanwhile, defines reach as "the number of people who saw any content from your Page or about your Page", with the disclaimer "This metric is estimated". In digital marketing, "reach" refers to how many *unique* users are exposed to online content, while the term "impressions" refers to how many times a piece of online content has been viewed, including multiple views by the same user. Reach and impressions are metrics that measure audience size and content visibility, but not the level or quality of interaction between audiences and content.



Photo by Max van den Oetelaar on Unsplash

Audience attention has always been commodified in this way. Even the media industries with the longest histories – radio, cinema, television, newspapers – fought for audience attention, which was monetised, tracked, and sold to advertisers.

But today, it is sometimes claimed that we live in an **attention economy**, in which attention itself is a scarce and valuable commodity. Digital culture affords an abundance of information and content, but people have a limited amount of attention – so communicators and content creators *compete* for our attention, which is bought and sold in transactions between media industries, content creators, and advertisers. Philip Napoli (2011: 6) points out that a key feature of the attention economy is the emphasis on maximising exposure and increasing reach: in an attention economy, the primary concern for a communicator is how many people have been exposed to the message.

Attention in a fragmented media world

Think about how you, as a media consumer, distribute the valuable currency of your attention. It may be that your attention is fragmented across multiple types of communication content. Perhaps this results in distraction and a dilution of your concentration – or perhaps not. Regardless, it's likely that your choices are not the same as those of your partner, your work colleagues, your friends, even those of similar age or with whom you share cultural tastes and preferences. Your choices about how you spend the currency of your attention are your own.

Just as our attention may be fragmented across different texts and platforms, we ourselves belong to a fragmented rather than a mass audience. The term **fragmentation** refers to the proliferation of media, which has led to more choice for media consumers (platforms, content, devices, channels) and the erosion of the so-called mass audience. Today, audiences are "distributed over many different channels in no fixed pattern", as Denis McQuail points out in his book *Audience Analysis* (1997: 138), and content consumption has become more personalised.

In such an environment where attention is limited and audiences are distributed across platforms, outlets, devices, and content choices, communicators somehow need to achieve not just visibility but engagement. The collection and analysis of audience data responds to some of these problems by allowing for a personalised approach to communication. In 2015, Shoshana Zuboff coined the term "**surveillance capitalism**" to refer to the process by which our online behaviours are turned into data that is commodified, captured, and sold. Napoli writes that audiences have always been socially constructed by media industries, advertisers, measurement firms, and regulators (2011: 3). It would appear that today's audiences are also constructed by big data.

Ahead in Chapter 3...

Audiences and change

AUDIENCES AND CHANGE

So far in this chapter, we've seen that as audiences our identities and our position within the communication landscape are determined by forces that are often beyond our control or even our comprehension. These forces are constantly changing. Meanwhile, audiences themselves are driving changes in the media environment: they are doing things that are taking communication in new directions. To think about audiences, then, is to think about, with, and through *change*.



Image by Edar from Pixabay

Let's take a look at changing audience behaviour in Australia. A 2016 report by Regional TAM, OzTAM, and Nielson found that Australians were increasingly engaging in **multi-screening** – that is, spreading their media activity across multiple screens; for example, using a mobile phone to access social media while watching television. The report found that 76% of Australians multi-screen and 33% access content on three or more devices at once (i.e., triple-screening).

This has significance for communicators trying to reach and engage audiences, but it also radically

reshapes the way communication practices are embedded in everyday life. As we saw in Chapter 2, mobile devices have changed the relationship between audiences and media, not just because they allow us to move our media consumption outside fixed spaces (like the living room or the home office), but because they allow us to weave media and non-media practices together in complex ways. As multi-screeners, we can watch the latest episode of our favourite TV drama while expressing our opinion about the episode's plot developments on social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter). As media multitaskers, we can listen to a podcast while jogging in our local park, or play an augmented reality mobile game while strolling down the street.

Flash forward six years. In Australia in 2022, according to ACMA (the Australian Communications and Media Authority), most (95%) of audiences used some form of communication or social media website or app. 77% of young Australians aged 18-24 used four or more social media and digital communication tools in a week, and 43% of these young Australians used TikTok. To communicate, we used mobile calls, texts, and messaging or calling apps. We also used websites or apps to actively *engage* with content (sharing, commenting, liking) and to post or *create* content. Facebook was the dominant service for digital communication, although Meta-owned products appeared to be declining in popularity. Spotify was the dominant service for audio streaming and Netflix was the preferred subscription-video-on-demand provider. On average, we spent 16.1 hours per week watching video content, not including user generated content or short form online video services such as TikTok. 81% of us accessed news from online sources (ACMA 2022a and 2022b).

Compare these patterns of audience behaviour to the way you communicated and engaged with media in your childhood. Even if you're much younger than me, you'll notice significant changes. So why are we doing all these new things? Because we can? Because we have no choice? Because it suits us to do so? None of these answers fully captures the complexity of the way we, individually and collectively, are positioned in the relationship between media content, media industries, and everyday life.

Things to think about...

Does ACMA's snapshot of communication in Australia align with the way *you* use (and feel about) websites, apps, and digital tools?

If your answer to that question is no, what does this mean?

(Hint: it does not mean that you are invisible or that your experiences don't matter! What it *does* suggest is that wide-ranging audience research can help us identify trends, but not always capture individual experiences.)

The end of "the audience"?

In the midst of all this change, is "audience" even the right word to describe all that we do within networked, digitised webs of communication?

Media critic Jay Rosen argued back in 2006 that it was not. In a famous piece of online writing, Rosen called today's media consumers "the people formerly known as the audience", and argued that our media consumption has evolved beyond this word and its connotations of darkened movie theatres and eyes fixed passively on a screen.

There is merit to, and also many problems with, this argument. We can't easily separate old and new audience practices, no more than we can separate digital and virtual from embodied and emplaced experiences. The more we try to draw these lines, the more we are in danger of reading our communication landscape – and ourselves – in an oversimplified way.

The term "audience" certainly has currency today and has not disappeared from use. However, this term now encompasses a range of practices. We'll explore this more fully in Chapter 8, but it deserves mentioning now. Audiences don't just listen, watch, and read. They also make, share, play, recreate, and speak back. Professional communicators engage with their audiences in increasingly dialogic ways – and the boundary between professional and amateur communicators is becoming increasingly blurred.

Interestingly, this movement across the boundary between senders and receivers means that those traditionally thought of as "audiences" must now, as content creators and communicators themselves, think about *other audiences* for their work. This may be as simple as considering the number of likes you receive for a post on Facebook, or contemplating the professional brand you're curating on LinkedIn. In other words, the practice of *imagining an audience* is no longer solely the purview of those in professional communication roles – it is an everyday practice applicable to anyone who uses digital platforms to communicate with those in their own personal or professional networks.

Ahead in Chapter 3...

The news and its audiences

THE NEWS AND ITS AUDIENCES

In this chapter we've seen that there is a complex relationship between audiences, communicators, content, and context. This holds true whether we are in the parlour of a house in early 20th century America, being a "good listener" as we practice Baker's "art of conversation", or traversing the virtual spaces of social media as a 21st century digital communicator trying to improve the reach of our content.

In the final sections of this chapter, we'll take a closer look at this multifaceted relationship by focusing on a particular type of communication: news.

Why news? Even in a fragmented media environment, where audience attention is dispersed across a staggeringly high number of platforms and outlets, news consumption remains important. Most of us are news consumers in some form. Even if we actively avoid the news, that in itself is a practice worth investigating. (Indeed, news avoidance is on the rise).

As a media industry with a very long history, news also gives us an opportunity to observe changes over time. There are some fascinating studies on news consumption in the first half of the 20th century that still have great relevance today, including Bernard Berelson's famous investigation of how New Yorkers "missed the news" during the newspaper delivery strikes of 1945 (Berelson 1949).



Photo by Ron Lach from Pexels. What kind of news audience are you? Listener, reader, scroller... or news avoider?

Today, the audience is at the heart of some of the news industry's major problems, which include declining trust in journalism, increasing polarisation, the sharing of misinformation, and the erosion of audiences for mainstream news outlets. Meanwhile, since the early 2000s, audiences themselves have been taking on journalistic roles through blogging and by producing user-generated content for mainstream news outlets, leading to the rise of **citizen journalism**. At the same time, journalistic roles have changed to encompass more interaction with audiences on social media platforms.

But what do audiences actually *do* with news?

Historically, audience behaviour was neglected in academic studies of the news industry, which were more concerned with news production (how news was made) and the analysis of news texts (Bird 2011). More recently there has been what Irene Costera Meijer described as an "audience turn" in journalism studies and in journalism practice. Costera Meijer defines this "audience turn" as a shift "from paying attention to audiences as problematic for journalism's role in democracy to reckoning with audiences as fundamental to keeping journalism alive as a constructive force in democracy" (2020: 2330).

In other words, those who study and practice journalism are no longer thinking of news audiences as a vague, undefined public to whom news is "served". The expectations of audiences, and their interactions with news products and practices, are now front of mind within the industry and the scholarship.

Things to think about...

Reflect on your own news consumption. Think about *how* you get your news, and also *why*: what motivates you to consume the news? Now read the next two sections, in which Master of Communication students reflect on and analyse their news consumption practices and their identities as news audiences.

Ahead in Chapter 3...

Case study – algorithmic news consumption

ALGORITHMIC NEWS CONSUMPTION

Deni Stanwix

I regularly consume news in a number of different ways. Some of this consumption is entirely intentional, some incidental, and a lot of my news consumption has been algorithmically curated to reduce effort expended on my part. I enjoy engaging with news through short-form content, with the option to click into articles of interest from deliberately varied sources, chosen with consideration in an attempt to prevent bias caused by source location, political leaning or demographic pandering.

"Algorithmic news consumption" is the consumption of news content that has been generated or distributed automatically through algorithms. The habitual use of algorithms can have an influence on the interpretation and classification of 'news-worthy' topics. News consumers should consider how and where they source their news, and the impact that a chosen news source may have on their understanding and interpretation of the world.

I consider the 'liking' and 'following' of choice accounts as an intentional and conscious attempt to curate my newsfeeds, providing me with the type of news and content that I wish to see. Lu (2020) defines the act of news curation as a process of evaluating and selecting information with the aim of utilising an algorithm to present useful, relevant, or meaningful content for the news consumer. Park and Kaye (2019) define news consumption as the 'reconstructuring, reformulating, repurposing, reframing and sharing of news through social media'. In this way, 'liking' or 'following' selected accounts is considered as an intentional and conscious attempt to curate a user's preferred newsfeed. I feel that curating my newsfeed helps me to exert a type of control and sense of order in relation to the type of content that I am presented with and consuming online.

In addition to my social-media news consumption, my husband and I have a physical newspaper subscription to The Saturday Paper which we read together on the weekend. We have also developed a routine where we discuss the email wrap of daily news headlines that we receive from 'Post' as we eat our breakfast each morning. I am also regularly exposed to Hobart's local newspaper, 'The Mercury' in the course of my work, as I monitor it for relevant topical stories or information.

While these news consumption habits are tied to the same news source-type (a newspaper), my consumption of the contents of each news provider are entirely different. Even when reading a traditional physical newspaper, I may choose to read a different set of articles from my husband. Therefore, it could be argued that news content is always curated and personalised where selection or filtering of content consumption can occur.

However, these curation practices arguably become more important in an online environment where algorithms govern the circulation of news.

Researchers have found that many individuals using content curation methods are accurately categorized as interested in news or politics and are successful in attracting their preferred content to their newsfeed (Thorston et al. 2019; Merten 2020; Park & Kaye 2019). However, by reducing the intentionality

of their news consumption users may increase the likelihood of disengaging with long-form journalism, instead placing trust in algorithms to provide simplified content with sufficient explanation so that they may maintain general oversight of current events.

Furthermore, the visibility of news and politics in a user's newsfeed depends on the user's actions, the actions of their 'friends', content publishers, and the algorithm built into the social media platform of their choosing. The algorithm infers their level of interest by tracking their behaviour and the overall level of interest displayed by them over time (Thorson et.al, 2019).

While news consumers may willingly reduce their personal responsibility for news consumption when relying on algorithms, Lee et.al (2019) argues that a certain level of control can be maintained through the utilisation of built-in features. The algorithm can be influenced by 'liking' or 'following' posts from accounts of interest, or by 'hiding' and 'reporting' posts or content that the user does not wish to engage with.

Thorston et.al (2019) argues that the algorithm's categorisation of users can also affect their level of exposure to news and political messaging, often to an extent beyond their self-reported level of interest. A study undertaken by Lee et.al (2019) found that individuals were more likely to engage in news curation that encouraged algorithims to prioritise content that they liked than they were to unfollow or block content that they did not. This was commonly attributed to a fear of missing 'important information or news' that may be shared by the publisher in future (Lee et.al, 2019).

News curation methodologies introduced in years prior may not be as effective in current times. When Facebook first rose to prominence in the early 2010s it actively sought to position itself as a news media platform (Meese and Hurcombe 2020) to increase revenue through associated online advertising. However, the business strategy changed in 2018, prioritising posts from users' family and friends to retain traffic on the Facebook site and disincentivise clicking through to articles hosted on external websites (Meese and Hucombe 2020; Bailo et al. 2021).

The platforms that are used to consume news may also affect the way that news is understood. Social media does not curate its content in the same way that a news publisher or broadcaster does (Lu 2020). While traditional media is developed under the supervision of an editor, with a clear beginning, middle, and end (Lu 2020), algorithms are designed to deliver information that will encourage the user to continue to engage with the platform.

Considering our news consumption habits can be illuminating. There are risks to relying on algorithms to curate consumption habits, and a 'set and forget' approach may decrease the likelihood of conscious engagement with long-form news. To be intentional and considerate about news consumption requires increased attention to the context, simplification, prominence, and real or imagined relationships surrounding the piece of news, which may skew an individual's perception of a story. Users should consider their habits around news consumption and counter any impact on their understanding of and interaction with the wider world because of algorithmic bias.

About the author

Deni Stanwix works in Strategic Communications and Policy at a not-for-profit health promotion organisation in Hobart, Tasmania. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Philosophy, a Post-graduate Certificate in Policy and Politics, and is currently studying a Master of Communication, specialising in Public Relations. She enjoys reading books, eating vegetables and asking questions.

Ahead in Chapter 3...

Case study – my transformative journey as a news consumer

EVOLVING PATTERNS: MY TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY AS A NEWS CONSUMER

Harshita Pant

Growing up in a tranquil town along the picturesque western coast of India, I cultivated the habit of perusing newspapers from my father. Returning from school each day, I would eagerly grasp the newspaper, seeking solace in a quiet corner where I could immerse myself in the printed tapestry of facts and stories, both hard and soft, that unfolded a world distinct from my own. Often, I would ponder, "Who penned these words?"

Reading the news not only endowed me with knowledge but also honed my communication skills and enriched my vocabulary. It sculpted my identity into that of a confident individual, one who proudly represented the school in various competitions such as quizzes and debates. My insatiable thirst for knowledge fostered a well-rounded outlook on various aspects of life.

The habit of reading newspapers persisted throughout my school years until I left home for the first time to pursue an undergraduate degree in journalism. A transformative shift occurred during this period. As Bird (2011: 493) insightfully notes, "Changes in viewing habits are associated with major changes in the life cycle." Whether it be the transition from childhood to adolescence, leaving the familial nest, or other pivotal life events, these changes naturally evoke shifts in viewing habits. In my case, this proved to be undeniably true.

The journey from the familiarity of my hometown to the pursuit of higher education in journalism marked a turning point. As a student of media, I delved into the intricacies of journalism ethics, values, and the critical concept of press freedom. Throughout my academic journey, a realization dawned upon me regarding the evolving landscape of news delivery, particularly in India. I became acutely aware of how the media, whether in print, broadcast, or radio, seemed to sway towards influencing rather than purely informing, contrary to its fundamental role.

During my transition from adolescence to adulthood, I observed a shift in my news consumption habits, spurred by a growing concern over the increasing prevalence of news distrust and avoidance. One particular incident etched vividly in my memory underscores this phenomenon. It unfolded in India, where students from a prestigious university were accused of raising anti-India slogans and endorsing Kashmir's secession. The incident, magnified by the media, sparked a nationwide uproar. However, what stood out during this time was the misrepresentation of facts by both mainstream and social media, resulting in the unjust vilification of innocent individuals and the misguided shaping of public opinion.

Upon completing my graduation, I secured a position in a prominent news organisation, thrusting me into the heart of a bustling newsroom where the pulse of news resonated 24/7. Immersed in this environment, my media experience underwent a profound transformation, blurring the boundaries

between work and personal life. The once-ingrained habit of leisurely reading newspapers gave way to digital consumption of news on various social media platforms.

My transition from a passive receiver of news delivered through traditional outlets to an active consumer on social media marked a significant shift. Now, not merely an audience member, I found myself donning the role of a journalist responsible for producing and disseminating diverse media content daily across various social media channels.

The relentless demand to stay abreast of news at all times exposed me to an overwhelming abundance of information, surpassing what was genuinely necessary. The constant access to social media, with its deluge of news updates, resulted in what Tang et al. (2021) define as information overload—a situation where individuals feel inundated, struggling to process the influx of information effectively.

In reflecting on my evolving news consumption patterns, several observations came to light:

- I found myself skimming through content without always verifying its accuracy and authenticity.
- I made a conscious effort to explore every facet of a news story, acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects, yet harbouring trust issues with the information.
- The sheer volume of information exceeded my attention limits, often leading to news fatigue.
- The prevalence of negative and distressing news left me feeling overwhelmed.

As a consequence, my interest in news waned, prompting a deliberate reduction in online information consumption. These observations underscore the challenges faced by media professionals navigating the evolving landscape of digital news consumption, emphasising the need for effective strategies to manage information overload and maintain a balanced and informed perspective.



Image by Chen from Pixabay

During my four-year tenure as a journalist in one of India's prominent mainstream media organisations, I observed instances where the media exhibited biases. These biases extended beyond political leaning to encompass the dissemination of misinformation and the promotion of one-sided narratives, ultimately misleading the public. Regrettably, my organisation, like several others, selectively covered news that did not cast the ruling government in a negative light. This practice involved selling incorrect narratives, promoting outright lies, and engaging in partial reporting. Beyond being ethically questionable and in violation of fundamental journalistic principles, such practices contributed to the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Despite the evident ethical lapses, our website consistently maintained high traffic, with a substantial number of readers actively engaging and sharing news online.

My political convictions seldom aligned with the stance of the organization I worked for, leading to internal conflicts and a questioning of my own identity. Navigating a professional space where perspectives differed significantly from my own proved challenging and, at times, tumultuous. Throughout my professional life, I often felt compelled to wear a metaphorical mask in the presence of superiors and bosses. Georgiou (2017) characterizes identity as "malleable," emphasising its connection to the presentation of self to others—an ordinary performance (see Chapter 6). The discrepancy between my work identity and my true self became apparent, leading to a sense of discomfort. I found myself "acting" in specific ways around colleagues, a feeling I detested because it meant not being authentic.

Juggling these dual identities proved challenging, requiring careful consideration of which aspects of my personality to reveal to different audiences. It became challenging to disentangle from my work identity. An incident outside of work hours further highlighted this struggle. Attending a protest in Delhi in 2019 and going live on my private Instagram account resulted in my boss advising me to leave immediately, fearing repercussions as it violated office policy. This experience underscored how staying true to my values posed a threat to my carefully curated work identity, leaving me torn between professional expectations and personal authenticity.

Faced with challenges like news information overload, misinformation, and biased reporting that raised doubts about the credibility, reliability, and objectivity of news, I consciously opted for a shift towards subscription-based news consumption. In 2020, I subscribed to Newslaundry, recognised as India's inaugural subscription-driven website, according to Wikipedia.

The shift to Newslaundry brought about several notable changes in my news consumption habits:

1. Elimination of news information overload. Subscribing to Newslaundry relieved me from the burden of information overload, allowing me to focus on a curated selection of news.
2. Exposure to high-quality content. The subscription model facilitated access to more high-quality content, enhancing the depth and breadth of my news consumption experience.
3. Heightened sense of trust. With a subscription-based approach, there was a noticeable increase in my trust in the news received, as it came from a source that prioritized credibility and reliability.
4. Control over news consumption. I gained full control over my news consumption, being able to select, prioritize, and navigate through the content according to my preferences.

5. Discernment between authentic and fake news. Subscribing to a reliable news source like Newslaundry equipped me with the tools to differentiate between authentic and fake news, contributing to a more discerning and informed news consumption pattern.

As I navigate through the twists and turns of this media journey, the realization dawns that the interplay between personal anecdotes and theoretical insights has not only enhanced my understanding but has also fostered a more discerning approach to news consumption and production. In this intricately woven tapestry of reflections, my journey with news emerges as a nuanced narrative, influenced by the changing landscapes of media, my evolving roles as both consumer and producer, and the ever-shifting dynamics of the information age.

About the author:

Harshita Pant is a seasoned storyteller with four vibrant years spent in the dynamic landscape of Indian news media. With an innate knack for weaving words, she possesses the ability to breathe life into mere thoughts, sculpting narratives that captivate and inspire.

Ahead in Chapter 3...

Chapter 3 wrap-up

CHAPTER 3 WRAP-UP

You have now finished Chapter 3.

We ended this chapter with a focus on news consumption, and you heard from two students about their experiences of being a news consumer today.

What does our news consumption case study tell us about audiences more generally?

- Audience practices are **unique** to the individual and **embedded** in everyday life
- However, there are **trends** that can be observed – individuals share their practices, motivations, and experiences with other audience members
- We should **never make assumptions** about audiences, what they do, why they do it, or how media effects them (more on this in Chapter 7!)
- We can avoid making assumptions by **collecting evidence** about audiences – from reflecting on our own experiences to interviewing, surveying, or observing others.

In the next chapter, we'll begin to consider how communicators make meaning – and engage their audiences – through signs and stories.

Chapter 3 References

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PART IV

CHAPTER 4: STORIES

STORY ELEMENTS

Think of a fairytale. Pick one of your favourites – a story you know very well. Hold the story in your mind: how does it begin? What are its twists and turns? What happens to the characters? How do we know we've reached the ending – what sense of resolution does it give us?

Now imagine how this fairytale would transform if it were told in different ways:

- As a stand-up comedy routine
- As a one-minute video on TikTok
- As a long-running drama on Netflix
- As a news story
- In a different genre (for example, horror or science fiction)
- As a video game
- As a three-picture story without words
- As a single image with a caption

Pick one of these "new forms" – one that stands out to you – and spend a moment mapping out what your transformed fairytale would look like.



Image by Yuri_B on Pixabay

Now take a look at your transformed fairytale, and consider these two questions:

1. What makes this new, adapted story the *same story* as the original tale?
2. What did you change, and why?

It's likely that you kept certain "elements" of the original story: perhaps a character, a plot development, a theme or message, a setting or world. James Paul Gee uses the term **story elements** to describe the way stories work in video games. He identifies certain "elements" – actors, objects, actions, states, and events – of which stories are composed, and which in the context of video games become items that the player manipulates as they interact with the storyworld (Gee 2005: 59). I find Gee's idea of story elements to be relevant *outside* the space of video games as well. In adapting your fairytale, you probably identified "elements" that you felt were important to the story – from objects (the poisoned apple of *Snow White*) to settings (the subarctic snowscapes of *The Snow Queen)* to plot developments (Beauty falling in love with the Beast).

However, when you re-housed the story in a new genre or a new format, you also *changed* particular elements to suit the story's new home. Maybe you altered the gender, age, personality, or actions of the main character, or transformed a previously marginalised character into the hero. Maybe you modernised the world or darkened the themes. If you were adapting your fairytale as a Netflix drama, you probably

thought about extending and complicating the narrative so that it suited the new format – but if you were reimagining your fairytale as an image or a three-picture-story, you found ways to simplify or condense the narrative into recognisable visual features. If you were adapting your fairytale into a news story, you would have changed the way you delivered information to your reader – you probably told the end of the story first, to suit the conventions of newswriting which demand that the most important information (the who, what, where, and when) appears at the beginning of the story. Perhaps, keeping in mind the focus of the previous chapter, you thought about your audience – were you shifting the fairytale from a child to an adult audience, and if so, what narrative transformations did this require or unlock?

This exercise tells us three very important things about storytelling.

1. Stories contain particular elements that contribute to the pleasures they offer.
2. Stories transform and can be retold – and when they are retold, they offer a combination of *new* and *familiar* narrative pleasures.
3. Storytelling is a communication process that extends far beyond the classic fairytale or bedtime picture-book. Storytelling is relevant to communicators of all sorts: photographers, journalists, screenwriters, performers, artists, influencers, and more.

This chapter is about storytelling, and its inclusion in this book acknowledges that storytelling is a fundamental and vital part of human communication: it is at once a skill, a strategy, and also something deeper – an implicit relationship between communicator and audience. And *as* a fundamental and vital part of communication, storytelling is both familiar and challenging. On the one hand, telling stories is something we do *all the time*, at multiple points in our daily life (have you told a story today? You probably have!). On the other hand, it's a craft and a skill that can take years to learn and can be difficult to get right. But when we *do* get it right, good storytelling can change the world.

In this chapter...

Story features and narrative pleasures

Storytelling as a communication tool

Storytelling as sense-making

"Read the room": images, signs, and stories

Case study – the semiotics of anthropomorphized animals in the Philippines

Chapter 4 wrap-up

To continue reading Chapter 4, click “Next” in the bottom right corner or **follow this link**.

STORY FEATURES AND NARRATIVE PLEASURES

We don't have to look far to find examples of storytelling in professional communication contexts. TED talks, podcasts, and feature articles all use storytelling to reach and engage audiences. Advertisements tell stories to imbue a product with meaning, while influencer-led marketing involves the sharing of stories in order to put a human face on an otherwise faceless brand. A successful journalist is commonly understood to be someone with an instinct for a good story, while activists and campaigners often try to grab mainstream media attention so that *their* stories are picked up by the news and told to a wider audience.

Meanwhile, the ability to tell a good story might make you the preferred candidate for a job, or help you secure funding for a start-up. Research has even shown that good storytelling skills can make you seem more attractive and appealing as a romantic partner (Donahue and Green 2016).

As an educator in this field, I know how important storytelling is to students, and to the industry practitioners who employ them. Many years ago, I helped design a media studies course at an Australian university. We conducted a lot of market research with prospective students, asking them what they really wanted to learn about journalism, screen production, and public relations. Their answer: storytelling. These students already knew how to use technology; they could shoot, edit, and share their own video content; they were bloggers, podcasters, and social media experts with high levels of digital literacy, many of them already working in the industry. What they really wanted was guidance on how to tell good stories. And when we asked prospective employers what they wanted to see in communication and media studies graduates, their answer was strikingly similar: they wanted people who could tell compelling stories across multiple media platforms.

But, as Michael Kent points out, "knowing that storytelling is important and knowing how to create effective narratives is not the same thing" (2015: 480). Kent, a public relations scholar, argues that storytelling is sometimes depicted as an easy tool for brand communication and social media engagement, "something quite simple that everyone already knows how to do well" (2015: 481) rather than a craft that can take decades to hone. He points out that online lists, blogs, and social media posts often talk about storytelling without really understanding what it means – and often, such texts simply use the term "storytelling" interchangeably with "communication". Similarly, you may have heard someone described as "a good storyteller" in a way that means very little. In this chapter, we want to dig deeper and explore below the surface. What makes storytelling an effective tool for communication? What does it mean to tell compelling stories in a crowded media landscape?

To answer these questions, we need to understand how storytelling works. We also need to understand the impact of storytelling as a practice: on social change, on understanding, and on the ideological structures that surround and underpin our everyday lives.

Our world is full of stories, in "almost infinite forms", as the semiotician Roland Barthes once wrote (1994). The examples given by Barthes include comics, conversation, and stained-glass windows, along with the usual suspects – news, cinema, and novels. In the years since Barthes compiled that list, we've been telling stories on Instagram, with infographics, and in virtual reality experiences. A playlist on Spotify can tell a story, as can an exhibition in an art gallery. Yes, storytelling is more than the delivery of information – but with such diversity of story forms, is it possible to find defining features that are common to all stories?



Image by WikiImages from Pixabay. Stained glass windows remind us that storytelling is all around us, and stories can take many forms.

Perhaps it is. Let's start with **character**. Most stories have a human (or non-human) character at their heart. And stories become stories via the magic ingredient of care. By "care", I don't just mean that stories

are *crafted with care* – although this is important too. In most stories, it's vital that we, the audience, *care about* one or more of the characters. We don't have to like them, but we should care about their experiences and their plight, for any of a number of reasons including curiosity, admiration, empathy, or a stronger form of identification where we imagine ourselves in the character's shoes. This investment in and connection to the character binds us to the unfolding events that constitute the narrative.

And these events within a story are linked rather than randomly arranged. Usually, they are connected in a way that is feasible or believable according to the logic of the storyworld. These links involve causation and consequence: one event causes another and these causally linked events form a **plot**. For example, in the children's story *Where the Wild Things Are*, the hero Max misbehaves, which causes his mother to send him to bed without supper, which causes him to travel to the land of the wild things.

Often, stories begin when the character experiences some kind of change in their circumstances – something happens to disrupt the equilibrium of their everyday life. In his book *The Writer's Journey*, screenwriter Christopher Vogler (1992) describes this as leaving "the ordinary world" and responding to "a call to adventure". Think of Dorothy being whisked away from Kansas, or Frodo Baggins leaving The Shire to set off on his quest.

And stories *end*: they don't just fizzle out. Endings are important because they bring a sense of resolution and balance to the narrative. Sometimes, stories have a "sting in the tale" or an unexpected ending. This may be a twist (an ending that changes our experience of the narrative) or it may be a punchline (an ending that helps us understand the narrative or "get the joke"). An ending can also come about when the character achieves their goal. For example, *Where the Wild Things Are* ends when Max returns safely home and finds a hot supper waiting for him.

Stories elicit pleasure in a way that information alone does not. We enjoy stories. They are entertaining. Good stories are frequently described as "compelling" – this means the narrative events attract and hold our attention, often to the extent that it is difficult to disentangle ourselves from them. Think of a book you're unable to put down, or a TV program you can't stop thinking about.

To be **entertained** by something is to be involved in a sort of transaction – you give a story your attention in return for pleasure. But to say that stories are "pleasurable" does not mean they are necessarily happy, light-hearted, or frivolous. Much of the entertainment media we consume for pleasure is neither "fun" nor "happy"; our entertainment texts do not always console us or make us feel that the world is a comfortable, safe, or enjoyable place to inhabit. Dark or troubling stories can still be entertaining if we form a strong relationship with the characters, sharing their experiences, vicariously living their struggles, victories, adventures, and even their everyday routines. These characters may not always be people we admire or aspire to be like: they might be people we fear becoming. For example, stories about crime or horror can satisfy our desire for escapism by transporting us to another world and allowing us to experiment with alternative identities.

Complex narratives

In today's entertainment media landscape, narratives and the pleasures they offer have become very complex. Looking specifically at TV drama, Jason Mittell (2006) identified "narrative complexity" as a

feature of new storytelling patterns that surfaced in the late 1990s and continue to dominate TV writing today. Such complexity emerged as the product of what Mittell describes as an intersection between technological developments, changing audience expectations, and shifting production practices. Informed by these intersecting forces, TV programs today – especially television dramas – often feature complex plotlines unfolding over multiple episodes and impacting a large cast of characters rather than a single protagonist. Audiences can be relied upon to remember intricate plot details and do not need cliff-hangers to lead them to the next episode – but they *do* need a reason to retain their subscription to a video-on-demand service. The pleasures of following a sophisticated storyline and vicariously participating in the adventures of *characters we care about* may give us just such a reason. Storytelling practices, then, are also built into business models and shaped by industry imperatives, and can be used to make creative content more profitable.

Meanwhile, entertainment media franchises like *Star Wars* or *The Avengers* consist of vast storyworlds created by teams of writers; rather than one central character there are hundreds. Such franchises often disperse narrative elements systematically across multiple media platforms, a process known as **transmedia storytelling**. Single stories tend to get lost in a cluttered, noisy, and fast media environment – but *transmedia* stories can deeply engage audiences, build their loyalty, and hold their attention.

The term transmedia storytelling was coined by Marsha Kinder, who wrote in 1991 about the "entertainment supersystems" that were emerging in children's television. Media theorists like Henry Jenkins (2006) have since teased out the idea of transmedia storytelling, which has become an important communication concept used not just in studies of entertainment media but in theory and practice relating to journalism, documentary filmmaking, and advertising. In the video below, the advertising agency FCB Global explains transmedia storytelling from an industry perspective.



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Cinderalla 2.0 – Transmedia Storytelling, FCB Global

Ahead in Chapter 4...

Storytelling as a communication tool

STORYTELLING AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL

It's relatively easy to understand how storytelling informs the production of content for entertainment purposes. We know that successful films, television programs, video games, and podcasts will use storytelling to enchant audiences and satisfy their need for escapism. But not all communicators are aiming to entertain their audiences – so why should storytelling matter to those who are trying to share information or influence public opinion?



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Knowing how to tell a good story is like having mind control | Alan Alda | Big Think

In the video above, Hollywood actor Alan Alda (using his own talent for spinning a story) explains the difference between information and storytelling. He also explains how and why this matters to people who aren't in traditional "storyteller" roles. The scientist at the centre of Alda's story is able to share his scientific discovery – in other words, to communicate more effectively across a wider range of publics – when he employs a storytelling technique. This technique involves foregrounding certain aspects of his message over others, and thereby turning himself into *a character we care about, to whom interesting things happen*.

There is a lesson here for communicators of every stripe, but particularly those who work in fields that are information-driven, like science or health: facts are important, but when it comes to *communication,* facts alone are not enough. For this reason, it's often pointed out that the most successful communicators are those who know their way around a narrative. In other words, storytelling is not just the terrain of novelists, screenwriters, or teams of writers working on entertainment media franchises.

For example, digital content creators who want their content to "go viral" (to be shared and spread widely) need to think about crafting their message using narrative techniques. In his book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, Jonah Berger (2013) names storytelling as one of his principles for creating spreadable content – that is, content that people are more willing to share, and that will therefore circulate with ease through the media landscape. Berger describes stories as the vessels in which information travels. Stories grab attention, he argues, and engage us on an emotional level, so people are more likely to share and respond to information when it is wrapped in a narrative.

Something to think about...

Can you think of a piece of viral media that has achieved fame or notoriety because it tells a good story?

An easy way to see this technique in action is to think of an advertising campaign where stories are used as "vessels" for raising brand awareness. Many of the most memorable campaigns do exactly this. Since 2014, for example, the "Feels Like Home" campaign for Australian airline Qantas has been telling stories about families who are reunited when the airline flies a family member home. The 2023 version of this campaign depicts a real-life family reunion featuring an Australian mother and her son. Rather than share *information* about the airline, this campaign shares a story, albeit one with a logical connection to the brand: Qantas *is* an airline and therefore a product that *can* facilitate a family reunion.

Ahead in Chapter 4...

Storytelling as sense-making

STORYTELLING AS SENSE-MAKING

Let's consider this relationship between 'storytelling' and 'information' in another context. You've no doubt heard of **data journalism**: a type of journalism where data (facts, statistics, and pieces of information) are used to find, generate, or evidence a news story. The term is often associated with increased public access to large datasets. Data journalism can allow journalists to go beyond the limits of traditional news production and represent ideas that are difficult to articulate in words or images alone, helping them tell stories about big, complex issues.



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay. We are surrounded by data – can it be a tool for storytelling? What stories are "baked into" the data? (Gray and Bounegru 2021)

However, data is not a means by which journalists simply "reveal" information to audiences. And it's important to remember that the data itself is *not* the story. Often, journalists will look for patterns in the data in order to tell a story, and/or they will combine data with other news-making techniques like interviews with real people who can help them put a "human face" on the issue.

At the same time, a good journalist will handle data with their critical thinking switched on – they will

be wary of any implicit stories the data seems to tell. As Jonathon Gray and Liliana Bounegru note in their introduction to *The Data Journalism Handbook*, "Data does not just provide neutral and straightforward representations of the world, but is rather entangled with politics and culture, money and power" – consequently, journalists should consider what ideologies or misconceptions are "baked into" the data (Gray and Bounegru 2021).

This is important. Whether we are thinking about data journalism, advertising, or science communication – or something else – narrative is not just a technique for engaging your audience, it is also *a way of organising meaning* according to particular worldviews. When stories are told, power is enacted. So the dataset a journalist is working with may privilege some perspectives and marginalise others, while the representations of "family" in an ad campaign like that from Qantas (in the previous section) will normalise particular relationships, ways of being, and ways of *wanting*.

Ecolinguistics professor Arran Stibbe refers to these sense-making narratives as "the stories we live by". Such stories, for Stibbe, are "mental models which influence behaviour" (2020: 1). The stories we live by are not necessarily the stories told in novels, films, or picture books – they "exist behind and between the lines of the texts that surround us" (2020: 3), and they quietly normalise particular ways of thinking and behaving in the world. Because they are not obviously stories, it takes effort to recognise them and to question, unpack, and rethink them, but such work is essential for anyone who wants to make change in the world – indeed, Stibbe's argument reminds us of the centrality of communication to social change: he is essentially saying that we can change the world by changing (retelling, rethinking) the narratives.

For example, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) is a collection of stories about a human boy, Mowgli, who lives in the jungles of India with non-human animal companions. Widely known today due to two popular Disney films and a swathe of other adaptations, *The Jungle Book* is certainly a "story" and has all the features of a compelling narrative, including characters (who we are invited to care about), a carefully crafted plot, and a storyworld in which readers or viewers can lose themselves.

In Kipling's original text – and to varying extents, in its modern adaptations – Mowgli's humanness sets him apart from, and above, the other characters in the story: he has power over the jungle animals because he is human and they are not. The story that humans are superior to non-human animals is an example of a **story-we-live-by**. This "story" is played out again and again in the myths, writings, children's books, news stories, advertisements, documentaries, and popular culture texts about human/animal relationships that have surrounded us for centuries. And the story has consequences: it informs how humans might behave towards non-human animals and their habitats. There is plenty of interesting work being done by people who are trying to change this narrative. For example, a group of scholars led by Carrie Freeman have advocated for more equality in the way non-human animals are depicted and dealt with in news stories (Freeman et al. 2011).

Similar to Stibbe's "stories we live by" is the concept of **root metaphors**. As we'll see in the next section, a **metaphor** involves a transfer of meaning from one object to another. But as Alvarez and co-authors point out in their article about communication in medical settings, certain metaphors also "constitute the roots of human knowledge" (2017: 2). A "root metaphor" is a pattern of meaning that shapes our worldview and informs how we understand ourselves, our societies and cultures, and the relationships within those

societies and cultures. Often, root metaphors activate a 'common sense' perception of the world – an acceptance of a particular idea or perspective because 'that's the way things are'.

Root metaphors are "explanatory" rather than "poetic" (Alvarez et al. 2017: 2) – so they have a sense-making function, and rather than *reveal* reality, they lead to an *interpretation* of reality. The concept of a root metaphor comes from the work of American philosopher Stephen Pepper in his 1942 book *World Hypotheses*, which maps four worldviews using his "root metaphor theory" to describe their origins in common-sense thinking.



Photo by Daniel Watson on Pexels. What's at the root of the story?

As communication scholars we investigate storytelling because it helps us improve our communication practice, but also because it shows us how meaning is arranged in ways that benefit some at the expense of others. With both intentions in mind, it is essential that we learn to stop the flow of a story to determine how it works. This will make us better storytellers, and it will also help us expose the stories and root metaphors that lead to the formation of common-sense ideas and worldviews.

Storytelling and social change

Social change theorists Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning describe how we might stop the flow of a story using a tool they call "narrative power analysis": a mode of analytical thought-work grounded in the idea that power relations have narrative dimensions. In their book *Re:Imagining Change* (2010), Reinsborough and Canning explain that narrative power analysis involves breaking down a story to reveal its connection to power, as well as the purposeful use of storytelling to re-organise ideas and reshape 'common sense'. They argue that in order to communicate effectively, especially with a social change agenda in mind, we need to understand the stories that underpin the ideas we're working with:

> "In order to make systemic social changes, change agents must understand the histories and institutions that underlie contemporary social systems, as well as how these histories and institutions shape culture and ways of collectively making meaning." (Reinsborough and Canning 2010: 18)

Notice their use of the word "collective". While the idea of "storytelling" may conjure an image of a sleepy, passive child being read a bedtime tale, communicators must keep in mind that stories grow, are retold, and are *communal*. Paul VanDeCarr, writing for the American social justice non-profit organisation Working Narratives (now known as Narrative Arts) puts it like this:

> "...storytelling is not just a form of publicity but also a means of organizing. It's not just you telling a story to a passive audience, such as making a web video that induces viewers to chip in a few bucks to your group. (Though that's valid too.) Rather, storytelling goes in all directions. People respond to your stories; they may contest them or mash them up; they may build solidarity by sharing their own stories through an exchange that you organize." (VanDeCarr 2015: 3)

If storytelling "goes in all directions", it's not surprising that issues of control become important to professional storytellers. We can think of social change efforts, and more broadly of persuasion, in terms of *controlling the narrative* – whether our aim is to maintain or fundamentally alter that narrative and the ideas it contains. Here, we find ourselves returning to **power**. The relationship between communication and power involves a degree of control over social and ideological narratives. Understanding how stories work puts us in a better position to exert control over the narratives that surround or involve us.



Photo by S O C I A L . C U T on Unsplash

Ahead in Chapter 4...

"Read the room": images, signs, and stories

"READ THE ROOM": IMAGES, SIGNS, AND STORIES

We've seen that character is a central component of a story. But when it comes to images, stories can be told even when no characters are present. So how *does* an image tell a story? Perhaps images use a type of suggestion, gesturing to the past and present, inviting us to think about what has just happened and what is about to happen, as well as what is outside the edges of the frame.

When we start to think about how images tell stories, we begin to realise that storytelling involves a range of techniques and practices beyond just formulating a plot. Indeed, when we look at *visual* stories, we find ourselves confronted with the elaborate **signification** or meaning-making practices that lie at the heart of all communication.

Try this. Visit a royalty-free stock photography site like Pexels or Unsplash. Type "empty room" into the search bar, and scroll through the results. For each image, see if you can determine something about the people who dwell in or use this room. What sort of people are they? What are their qualities? And while you're at it, what sort of *room* is this? What is its purpose? Where in the world is it located?



Image by Peter H from Pixabay. Whose room is this? What's their story?

The results may vary, but it's likely that for many of the images you're able to answer at least one of these questions. And maybe your answers are quite detailed. You may even be able to write a long list of adjectives describing the fictional, unseen person who inhabits this room. They are fastidious or messy. They are wealthy or poor. They are young or old. They are interested in surfing, poetry, or science. Their life abounds with misery, solitude, busy-ness, or joy. It's also likely that for at least *some* of the images you're looking at, you can determine these things very quickly. In fact, the very act of capturing the various meanings you're making from the image may feel like slowing down the wheels of a mental machine that's moving at speed.

What you're identifying here are **signs**: the building blocks of stories. A sign is a unit of meaning, and all stories – indeed, all messages, all texts, all products of communication – are organised collections of signs. Every object in the empty rooms, every colour, every light and every shadow, is a sign that you can interpret to gain meaning about the room and its inhabitants. A cooking pot is a sign: it tells you that the room in question is a kitchen. A pot that is cleaned to the point of shining and hung on a hook above the sink tells you that the person who uses this kitchen is cleanly and takes pride in their work, whereas a pot that is grimy or caked with food and left in the sink tells you that the person is messy, or busy, or unconcerned with cleanliness. A glimpse of an outdoor landscape through the kitchen window featuring eucalyptus and wattle trees may be a sign that the kitchen is located in Australia. Dark shadows may be a sign that the kitchen is a spooky or threatening place – or that it is night-time.

Signs can be words – the sound of a word, the letters, the appearance of a word on a page. Signs can be visual – colours, shapes, visual devices like camera angles, the clues that help us decipher an image. And signs can also be sounds – a sound effect, a piece of music, a particular musical note or chord. Think about how effectively sonic signs are used by big global brands today, from the Netflix "ta dum" timpani strikes to the five notes that constitute McDonalds' "I'm loving it" jingle.

Anything that communicates meaning is a sign: gestures, movements, symbols, designs. And we can further break a sign into two parts: the **signifier** and the **signified**. The signifier is the form of the sign. It's what we perceive with our senses. In the case of a word, the signifier can be the letters on the page, or the sound of the spoken word. The signifier might also be an image, a colour, a gesture, a facial expression; something we recognise. The *signified* is the meaning attached to that sign, or the concept represented by the signifier. For example, the signified is the concept that jumps into your mind when you see the word TREE, or when you see an image of something with a brown trunk and green leaves.

One of the best ways of understanding how signs work is by thinking about colour. Colours are signifiers, and each colour has many attached meanings or signifieds. You can see how this works in the video below.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://deakin.pressbooks.pub/communicationconcepts/?p=106#oembed-1

COLOR PSYCHOLOGY from LidiaSeara on Vimeo. Each colour is a signifier, with many possible signifieds.

The meanings that are attached to colour allow communicators – including filmmakers, advertisers, graphic designers, photographers, and more – to use colour as a kind of visual short-hand, a means of activating particular sets of meanings. This can occur quickly and with minimal fuss. Why? Because storytelling is underpinned by certain codes and conventions. A **code** is a set of shared understandings about how signs are used. If we know the rules, we can use them to engage more effectively with our audiences. But these shared understandings might differ from culture to culture. Meaning is not fixed, and it is not universal. So red signifies danger or anger – but not to everyone, everywhere, across the world.

Semiotics

We are venturing here into **semiotics**: the science of signs. Semioticians are concerned with how meaning is made through sign systems, and semiotics or "semiology" emerged as an area of study in the late nineteenth century, led by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. What semiotics gives us is a set of communication concepts that can be used to analyse and also produce messages – it's a theory that underpins communication practice especially in fields like branding and graphic design.

Semiotics also has beautiful relevance for the study of storytelling. Ignasi Ribó describes narratives as "semiotic representations" because "they are made of material signs (written or spoken words, moving or still images, etc.) which convey or stand for meanings that need to be decoded or interpreted by the receiver" (2019: 2). Semiotics as the study of signs also allows us to see that *anything* can tell a story: a costume, a piece of music, a work of graffiti – or an image of an empty room.



Photo by Vidar Nordli-Mathisen on Unsplash. Read the room – what signs can you identify?

Visual storytelling

Images (as collections of signs) tell stories in many ways. To unpack the stories told by a picture, we can consider content (what is *in the image*, and what is not) and composition (how the image is arranged). We can reflect on where our eyes are drawn when we look at a picture, and how signifiers like lighting, camera angle, focus and depth of field are used to limit the range of possible ways we might respond. Written captions can further limit or "anchor" the range of potential stories told by an image, a semiotic concept known as **anchorage** (Barthes 1977: 156).

Images can also tell stories through **visual metaphor**. A metaphor is best known as a device used in writing and speech. When we use a metaphor, we communicate the meaning of one thing by referring to something else. The phrase "her expression was thunderous" is an example of a verbal metaphor. We don't mean that the person literally has thunder on her face – we are using *the idea of thunder* to communicate something about the person's facial expression (that it's dark and angry.) A *visual* metaphor, in turn, is when we communicate an idea or emotion using a seemingly unrelated image. A cluttered room could be a metaphor for a neglected inner self, or a busy mind. An empty room could be a metaphor for absence or loneliness. A prison room could be a metaphor for entrapment.

Visual metaphors have long been used in print advertising. As the semiotician Judith Williamson explained in her 1978 book *Decoding Advertisements*, when you place two otherwise unrelated objects

side by side in an image, a transfer of meaning occurs from one to the other. This is the logic behind the simplicity of print advertisements that feature a celebrity alongside a brand. Through visual proximity, the qualities of the celebrity are metaphorically transferred to the brand. And let's not forget about "root metaphors", discussed in the previous section. An advertisement featuring a celebrity endorser will apply visual metaphor to forge a connection between celebrity and brand, but it may also establish or confirm ideologically informed notions about beauty, power, gender, or identity.

The images in this book

Semiotics and visual metaphor have guided the use of imagery in this book. The images have been sourced from open stock photography sites as well as the media repository Wikimedia Commons. Each image illustrates a key concept, often in a metaphoric way. For example, in Chapter 2 I needed to find an image to represent the concept of open culture and the sharing of knowledge. I used a lightbulb to signify knowledge and ideas, and an open hand to signify sharing.

The cover image, designed by Master of Communication student Kym Lam Sam, also communicates through visual signs. Kym shared this insight into his design of the book cover:

"The cover... utilises different colours to symbolise diversity. The main shape is the letter 'C', an obvious nod to the alliteration in the title. But the use of concentric circles reminded me of a signal being broadcast. I took it a step further and fragmented one half to symbolise the process of decoding a message."

Notice how Kym, with his design hat on, has approached this task in a semiotic way. He mentions a number of signs: concentric circles *signify* a broadcast signal; fragmenting the image *signifies* the decoding process; the use of different colours *signifies* diversity.

Reading the room is a semiotic exercise

Throughout this section, I've been asking you to "read the room". *Read the room* is also an idiom – an expression used in the English language that has figurative, non-literal meanings. I've asked you to *literally* read the room: that is, determine who uses a particular room by deciphering the signs in an image. But in a different context, if someone asked you to "read the room" they might be suggesting that you try to understand your audience.

Interestingly, "reading the room" in its idiomatic sense is also a semiotic exercise. Someone who is adept at "reading the room" can pick up on subtle, often unspoken cues when communicating, and adapt their message, tone, or strategy to suit their audience's responses. To read the room is to interpret the signs of everyday interactions, finding signifiers in posture, body language, facial expressions, and subtle audio cues like throat-clearing, sighing, or nervous laughter. A stony silence or a shift in the room's energy can be subtle signifiers to which a skilled communicator will swiftly respond. What does this show us? Semiotic analysis is not just an academic theory – it is an everyday practice.

This section has shown that stories are built from signs, and that semiotics allows us to unpick the thread of a story in a way that is useful in the dual contexts of communication theory and practice. Applying semiotics, we can communicate more effectively and we can also analyse the products of communication and the meaning-making processes involved in their production. As we will see in the next chapter, *meanings matter*. But first, in the next section, you'll hear from a Master of Communication student who investigated the stories we tell about non-human animals, using a semiotic lens to unpack the 'hidden' meanings within these stories.

Ahead in Chapter 4...

Case study – the semiotics of anthropomorphized animals in the Philippines

THE SEMIOTICS OF ANTHROPOMORPHIZED ANIMALS IN THE PHILIPPINES' MEDIA LANDSCAPE

John Micael Callao

Have you ever considered how the media's portrayal of animals can shape our understanding of their meaning? Why do we often attribute human characteristics to these animals, turning them into our friends, kin, emotional characters, metaphors, or representations in our stories?

In the Philippines, the interplay of animal anthropomorphism, semiotics, and communication occurs within its evolving media landscape (Mendoza 2017), influencing public perception, policy decisions, and conservation efforts.

The concept of **anthropomorphism**, which involves ascribing human-like characteristics to non-human entities, plays a significant role in shaping our understanding of the animal kingdom (Kull 2014). From popular Disney characters to animal-themed movies and literature, as well as our daily interactions with our pets (Agrawal et al. 2020:13), anthropomorphism pervades various aspects of our lives and serves as a bridge between humans and animals, facilitating comprehension and actions. Semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings, provides a useful framework for understanding the symbols, representations, and communication involved in anthropomorphism (Tønnessen and Tüür 2014:2-18).

This case study investigates how meaning is conveyed and interpreted in the media landscape through a semiotic lens, with a focus on three anthropomorphized animals: the Philippine Saltwater Crocodile *(Crocodylus porosus),* the Butanding or Whale Shark *(Rhincodon typus)*, and the Philippine Eagle *(Pithecophaga jefferyi).* Through an analysis of media reports, the study reveals the underlying meanings of the visual and linguistic signifiers used to represent the animals and how they contribute to constructing and reinforcing certain cultural, social, and political values.



"Philippine crocodile" by Julia Sumangil is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

The Philippine Saltwater Crocodile signifies predation and political corruption within the context of Philippine society (Manalo and Manalo 2022). Various communication and media platforms contribute to the semiotic web surrounding this anthropomorphized reptile. In Filipino culture, the saltwater crocodile is depicted as a man-eater, symbolically linked to political figures colloquially known as "buwaya" (Van Der Ploeg et al. 2011). This portrayal associates crocodiles with corrupt government officials prioritizing personal gain over public welfare (Mendoza 2017), posing challenges to crocodile conservation initiatives. Conservationists stress the need to rebrand crocodiles and dispel negative connotations to secure economic benefits for rural communities.

Editorial cartoons featuring crocodile caricatures of politicians serve as visual critiques of the political sphere, using humour and satire to highlight politicians' self-serving nature. This semiotic framework reveals that the anthropomorphized crocodile embodies more than just a menacing predator. Additionally, the historical perspective illuminates a nuanced perception of crocodiles in the pre-colonial Philippines, where indigenous communities revered them as administrators of divine justice, reflecting their dual role in Filipino culture (Ayala Museum Philippines). While television series and literature contribute to crocodile anthropomorphism, it's essential to address the potential consequences of such portrayals, such as narratives like "Lolong," which may blur boundaries between human and wild animal relationships and mislead the audience into unsafe interactions with crocodiles (Grasso et al. 2020).



"Befriending Giants – Whale Sharks of Oslob on Vimeo by Blue Sphere Media" by lotuspilgrim is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Another example of an anthropomorphized animal in the Philippines' media landscape is the "Butanding," or Whale Shark. With lengths of up to 19.6 meters, whale sharks are the world's largest fish. These marine creatures represent a vital emblem of the Philippines, encapsulating not only the nation's ecological identity but also their depiction of the national currency, exemplifying their cultural and environmental significance. The "Butanding Festival" further underscores their profound integration into Filipino culture.

However, the anthropomorphism of butanding in media platforms has elicited a spectrum of reactions and actions, ranging from celebration to potential exploitation. Instances of individuals riding on the backs of these giants highlight the ease with which digital channels obscure the distinction between humans and animals (Agrawal et al. 2020). Some businesses leverage this anthropomorphism to boost tourism, presenting whale sharks as companions, which may inadvertently lead to their exploitation for economic gain (Araujo et al. 2019). The surge in butanding tourism raises significant concerns, as it can perturb the physiology, residency, behaviour, and overall ecosystem dynamics of these creatures. The challenge lies in understanding and addressing the implications of anthropomorphism in media and its subsequent impact on the perception and conservation of these marine beings.



"Noblest Flyer Philippine Eagle" by Shemlongakit is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

The third example is the Philippine Eagle. It represents conservation and Filipino identity, going beyond its mere biological existence within the archipelago (Sutton et al., 2023). This critically endangered raptor signifies the resilience of the Filipino people, its unique endemic status reinforcing its identity as a truly Filipino species. The media, encompassing diverse formats such as documentaries and social media platforms, plays a pivotal role in constructing narratives that influence public understanding and engagement with the Philippine Eagle's conservation plight.

However, the media's propensity to anthropomorphize the Philippine Eagle, attributing human-like emotions, requires careful consideration, as it may inadvertently diminish the perception of the species' fragility and conservation imperatives (Sutton et al., 2023). While the media serves as a powerful conduit for fostering awareness and advocacy for this endangered species, it must balance its role as a symbol

of strength and identity with the imperative to communicate the pressing need for conservation efforts (Grasso et al. 2020).

In brief, anthropomorphized animals in the Philippines have evolved into representations through complex semiotic interactions facilitated by communication and media platforms. These creatures, as symbols, carry evolving meanings that are influenced by semiotics, communication, and media, profoundly shaping our understanding of animals. The Philippine Saltwater Crocodile represents a symbol of political corruption, challenging traditional perceptions and encouraging critical reflections on governance. The Butanding is deeply connected to cultural identity and ethical concerns, while social media portrays them as "friendly" giants, influencing public perceptions and ethical discussions on tourism. The critically endangered Philippine Eagle signifies hope and national pride. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the use of anthropomorphism may lead to misconceptions about conservation needs. Therefore, it is imperative to critically examine the media's impact on our perception of these creatures, emphasizing responsible media practices and public awareness of the intricate semiotic narratives surrounding them.

About the author

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Ahead in Chapter 4...

Chapter 4 wrap-up

CHAPTER 4 WRAP-UP

You have now finished Chapter 4.

This chapter has shown that meaning is organised and articulated when stories are told. And whether or not storytelling techniques are being actively used by a communicator, the product or outcome of storytelling-as-communication is also *the production of meaning*.

We're going to dive deeply into *meaning-making* in the next chapter.

First, let's finish our journey through storytelling by taking stock of what has been covered in this chapter and applying it to communication practice. How might storytelling make someone a more effective communicator? Here are some of the ideas we've explored.

Key Takeaways

Narrative patterns can make ideas more compelling. Think about the defining features of a story – conflict, suspense, resolution, a connection between events – and consider whether and how they might apply to the message you're sending.

Don't overlook the power of visual storytelling. Photographers, graphic designers, and visual communicators of all kinds have a range of tools at their disposal, from the application of a clear visual metaphor to the use of captions as an anchoring device.

Break your story down into signs. See your story through a semiotic lens – think about and take control of how you're building meaning into your message.

Facts are important, but often they are not enough. Share histories, vignettes, anecdotes, not just information. Set the scene – help audiences create a mental picture to go along with the ideas you're sharing. Find a narrative in which to wrap your facts.

When working with data, look for patterns and trends. Don't leave data to speak for itself (because it won't).

Facts and data aren't ideologically neutral. Like stories, they invite us to see the world from a particular perspective.

Think about the deeper stories that underpin and inform how people feel about the topic you're

communicating on. Consider whether you need to change the narrative before you can change people's minds.

Perhaps most importantly, communicators should remember that a good story has at its heart *a character, who we care about, to whom interesting things happen.* No matter what sort of story you're telling, see if you can anchor your message in the experiences of a character – put a face on complex or abstract events and issues. VanDeCarr reminds us that a message should have a protagonist. When telling stories, particularly about dry or potentially boring issues, he advises:

> "Look for the people behind your issue. People are at the heart of every social issue; issues become abstract only when we cover them up with policy or technology or the law. Return to the human heart of the cause you're dealing with." (2015: 25)

The Solutions Journalism Network, a group advocating for a more solutions-focused approach to news reporting, has some interesting things to say about choosing a protagonist for stories about social issues. They advise journalists to look for a protagonist, but to avoid thinking of the protagonist as a hero. "Rich, three-dimensional characters and compelling narrative tension", they write, are more effective than hero worship (Bansal and Martin 2015: 17). They also advise journalists to reveal characters' challenges and struggles, and look for the "unlikely characters" – because change-makers may not always be people in positions of power. Their advice has relevance in the realm of social change communication more broadly, and perhaps it is relevant to all communicators. The human face you put on your message should be one to which your audience can relate.

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PART V

CHAPTER 5: MEANING

FRAMES AND FRAMING

When communicators communicate, they make a range of choices about what to include and what to leave out. Depending on the type of communication in question, choices will also be made about language, mode of address, or sources of information. A photographer will think about image composition, colour, lighting, focus, and camera angles. A podcaster will think about audio levels, background noise, music, and tone of voice. A video editor will think about pacing, transitions, and colour correction. An online content creator may think about all of these, and more.

Let's consider a simpler example. Imagine you're crafting an email to a work colleague. It's likely that you'll make careful choices about wording and tone, as well as what details to include and what to leave out. You might even think carefully about the length of your email and what time of day it should be sent.

These choices matter because they have consequences – they contribute to the meaning of your message. Variations in the way you write and send emails can communicate that you are friendly, angry, rushed, formal, eager, cautious, well-informed – the list goes on. If you were to write your entire email in **hot pink text**, or send it from your personal rather than your work account, you will create subtle (or not-so-subtle) differences in the possible ways your colleague will interpret the message.

And the key takeaway here is this: your choices *will* have consequences, regardless of whether you think them through carefully or not. Every choice will shape meaning in your message.

The communication concept that best helps us understand this situation is **framing**. Framing is a way of analysing – or actively controlling – how a particular event, issue, person or place is packaged for interpretation through communication processes.



Photo by Khaled Reese from Pexels. What's in the frame?

"Frames" are ways of seeing and understanding something. They are a bit like thought habits – patterned ways of thinking that we call upon to make sense of an issue, event, or person. In the Public Interest Research Centre's Framing Equality Toolkit, frames are described as "structures of meaning... mental structures through which we view the world and communication tools we use to engage with other people" (Blackmore and Sanderson 2017: 15).

Fram*ing*, in turn, is about "creating meaning" (Blackmore and Sanderson 2017: 15), particularly by making certain pieces of information more noticeable or memorable for audiences. We call this sense of noticeability **salience**. Certain aspects of a message jump out at audiences while others are obscured.

Let's take another simple example. If someone asks you, "what did you do on the weekend?", you're unlikely to tell them *everything* that happened and everything you did over those 48 hours. You will probably select certain details or qualities to emphasise. You might say you were busy and caught up on your studies, or that you were active and went for a run, or that you spent time with friends.

When you choose which details to emphasise in your communication, you are framing your weekend for your listener. You might even be doing this consciously and strategically – perhaps you want your listener to think of you as a busy, active, or social person.

Now consider how this process works in the context of a busy newsroom. Imagine a journalist reporting on homelessness in her local town. Newsmaking processes demand that the journalist will first conduct research, which may include interviewing particular sources as well as conducting desktop research in order to find relevant statistics and other information. The journalist will then write her story, making various choices along the way – what words to use, what quotes to include, which details to foreground, and what

angle to take. The journalist is likely to be working to a deadline, and these time pressures may have an effect on the finished product. She may also be influenced by the news agenda or newsroom culture of her organisation.

The choices made by the journalist result in the story being told in a particular way, with certain details emphasised and others marginalised or silenced. Perhaps the journalist interviewed an academic expert or an authority figure like a local police spokesperson, but failed to interview a person experiencing homelessness – in which case, the story will perpetuate an idea that people experiencing homelessness are other, voiceless, or not worthy of attention; it may also contribute to the framing of homelessness as a "police matter" or a type of deviant social behaviour. The issue will be framed in a different way depending on whether the journalist has used or avoided words with negative connotations, such as "beggar" or "vagrant". Perhaps the journalist takes an investigative approach and explores how homelessness intersects with other social issues like mental health, family violence, the justice system, or ineffective social policy. Such an approach would shine a very different light on the issue and illuminate more of its complexities.

It may well be that the journalist is not actively trying to frame the issue of homelessness in any particular way, but is making choices informed by other factors relevant to professional practice: an impending deadline and the need to file the story quickly; the advice of an editor; the availability of images; her own instinctual sense of the newsworthiness of the story; or a combination of all these factors. Regardless of why the journalist made her choices, these choices shape how homelessness as a social issue is defined – they can also shape the attribution of responsibility (that is, they tell us who might be to blame for homelessness as a social problem).

So, whether we are in professional or everyday communication contexts, framing is the result of choices made about what to include, what to leave out, and *how* to express a message. The result of these choices is the shaping of meaning.

Meaning matters

In this chapter, we'll explore the relationship between communication and meaning, using a series of case studies.

Does meaning still matter?

Some would argue that it does not. Some, indeed, would say that the most exciting and arresting aspects of communication today are unrelated to meaning-making – they would argue that mediated communication is interesting because it extends our senses, recalibrates our identities, and reforms our political landscapes. What does it matter what (or whose) meanings are made along the way?

Like all assumptions, this one deserves a second, critical, look.

In this book, we're interested in meaning because meaning underpins, infuses, and entangles with identity, politics, and even sensory experience.

The position we're taking in this book is informed by **social constructionism**, a branch of theory that explores the *social constructs* through which we collectively understand the world. Communication concepts are themselves social constructs – agreed upon ways of organising information that prioritise some ways of seeing over others.

From a social constructionist point of view, what we call "media" are systems of representation through which social norms are established or challenged. In arguing for a theory of media and communication that tilts towards rather than away from social theory, Nick Couldry reminds us that "the meanings circulated through media have social consequences" (2012: 8). And as communication contexts and practices become more complicated, meanings and their social consequences become ever more fascinating to investigate.

In this chapter...

Strategic framing

Case study – Racialised media coverage of Meghan Markle

Case study – Media representation of women in sport

Case study – the semiology of protests in Paris

Chapter 5 wrap-up

To continue reading Chapter 5, click "Next" in the bottom right corner or **follow this link**.

STRATEGIC FRAMING

We've seen how journalists might frame a topic, person, or issue. Let's now consider meaning-making – and its social consequences – in other professional contexts.

In public relations, framing is a strategic practice. Public relations practitioners participate in the social construction of meaning to achieve a planned outcome (Anderson 2018: 112) – for example, to create, refresh, or repair the identity of a corporate brand, or to shape public responses to an issue.

Social media influencers also engage in framing practices. This is how influencers *influence* – they combine verbal and visual elements of a social media post in a strategic way so that certain parts of their message are made more prominent than others. They may deliberately leave out certain details in order to enhance their capacity to influence others, whether their goal is to promote a product, gain traction for social change, or gain more followers.

Influencers also frame *themselves*, and/or their own lifestyle, by making certain elements more salient (and leaving other things out). Such practices are increasingly drawing the attention of media and communication researchers. For example, in a 2022 study published in the journal *Media and Communication*, Devos and co-authors found that female influencers often engage in framing practices to depict themselves as "superwomen", complying with societal expectations that women should have, and be able to do, everything.



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

Influencers and reframing

Framing practices can also be used by influencers and thought leaders to *reframe* dominant thinking about social issues. For example, body positivity advocate Taryn Brumfitt was named 2023 Australian of the Year after more than a decade of campaigning to change social norms about beauty and wellbeing. She used

social media, documentary filmmaking, and public appearances to challenge the cultural narratives that frame certain body types as "desirable" and "perfect".

Brumfitt was catapulted into the spotlight when she shared a simple yet powerful "before and after" image on Facebook. The image showed Brumfitt with a sculpted and traditionally "perfect" body during her years as a bodybuilder together with a later photograph of her naturally curvy post-pregnancy body. The viral image is best described as a "reverse before and after", because Brumfitt labelled her curvy body as the ideal – representing her self-acceptance and inner happiness while also subverting the conventions of a genre of social media communication where body "problems" are seemingly "fixed" and bodies are transformed to meet pre-defined beauty standards. You can see the image and read more about her story in this piece by the ABC.

Reframing – another example

In 2023 another former Australian of the year, Paralympian Dylan Alcott, launched Shift 20, an initiative that lobbies for greater representation of people with disabilities in screen advertising. Addressing the lack of disability representation in Australian advertising, Alcott's initiative pushes for people living with disabilities to feature as talent in screen-based advertisements for major brands.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://deakin.pressbooks.pub/communicationconcepts/?p=120#oembed-1

Shift 20 Initiative – Mini Doc | The Dylan Alcott Foundation

It's pointed out on the Shift 20 website that nearly 20% of Australians live with disability, but only 1% of ads *feature* those living with disability – a major disparity between representation and reality. Media representations *aren't* a reflection of "the real world"; but those who work to *change* representational patterns affect real-world change. In the case of Shift 20, the intention was to create a more inclusive society by "shift[ing] the perception of what disability is and what it can be". This, too, is an example of *reframing*.

What do these examples show us? They show us that communicators do not just *share* meaning – they *shape* it, often in a way that has real-world impacts. The decisions we make as communicators can result in the transformation of meaning, and in the confirmation or disruption of long-held norms and ideologies.

Communication research often goes in search of meaning. Whether we are interested in framing, or in **discourse** (how language shapes meaning) or in storytelling or semiotics (see Chapter 4), or in **political economy** (how economic imperatives shape the enactment of meaning and power), we dismantle communication processes to expose representations at work. This can make us better communicators, and it can also further knowledge and critical thought about topics that *matter*. Analysis is our tool for

determining how meanings are made (and who those meanings serve). In the following three case studies, students use communication concepts – including semiotics and framing – to lever open and analyse media representations of topics that matter to them.

Ahead in Chapter 5...

Case study – Racialised media coverage of Meghan Markle

RACIALISED MEDIA COVERAGE OF MEGHAN MARKLE

Kelsey Avalon

Many of us find some escapism in magazines, digital publications or news articles about celebrities. From the outside, it seems that the *point* of media coverage of celebrities is its low stakes. Headlines about glitzy outfit choices, romance scandals, extravagant shopping sprees or petty fights in palatial mansions appear to be a world away from the ever-looming threats to regular folk of economic, political or climate crisis.

Yet, media coverage of celebrities, both in its volume and content, can reflect a society's attitudes to topics like race, class, gender, sexuality, family and politics. In addition, the way in which particular celebrities are venerated or criticised in the media can provide opportunities to reflect on our social values. Never is this more present than in headlines about the women of the British royal family, by whom Australian audiences have been enthralled for decades.

When first pictured with future husband Prince Harry in 2016, Meghan Markle, a divorced, biracial American actress, embodied a unique figure in the public imagination. Within weeks, Markle became the world's most-Googled woman.

Like 'commoner' royal women before her, including sister-in-law Kate Middleton and late mother-in-law Diana Spencer, it could be expected that Markle would have some struggles in negotiating her new identity and Royal life, and that these charming social faux-pas would become tabloid fodder. Even so, it was notable that the media coverage of Meghan Markle was largely negative, differing from her predecessors in ways that highlighted racial distinctions rather than just class differences.

First to cover the relationship between Markle and the Prince was the tabloid newspaper the Daily Mail, with a front-page article titled 'Straight Outta Compton', using the lyrics of a violent gangsta-rap song in referring to the 'tatty, gang-infested and crime-ridden' neighbourhood in which Meghan was raised. In the article, Markle's mother Doria Ragland, a successful teacher and social worker, was pictured against a grey wall in rumpled clothing, flip-flops and locs hairstyle, in an image reminiscent of a police mugshot. In bold print, the article highlighted crimes in the local area as well as a decades-old bankruptcy filing by Ragland.

At first glance, the headline accurately identifies the suburb of Los Angeles where Markle spent her childhood. Yet, to the public, this article and those that followed symbolically connected Markle to Black criminality, poverty and untrustworthiness, in a way that can be seen to undermine her suitability as a Duchess, the wife of a Prince, even a mother.

Consider the following contrasting headlines about Markle and sister-in-law Kate Middleton.

Kate Middleton, Princess of Wales	**Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex**
Kate Middleton's homegrown bouquet of lily of the valley follows royal code	Royal wedding: how Meghan Markle's flowers may have put Princess Charlotte's life at risk
Not long to go! Pregnant Kate tenderly cradles her baby bump	Why can't Meghan Markle keep her hands off her bump? Experts tackle the question that has got the national talking: Is it pride, vanity, acting – or a new age bonding technique?
Kate's morning sickness cure? William gifted with an avocado for the pregnant Duchess	How Meghan's beloved avocado linked to human rights abuse and drought

Source: The Daily Mail

In the seven years since the *Straight Outta Compton* piece, thousands of media articles have covered Markle in similarly pejorative ways, to avid consumption by primarily white, female readerships. The 'Angry Black Woman Trope' is unfortunately a not-uncommon media occurrence, whereby Black women specifically are caricatured as aggressive, masculine and animalistic; positioning them as threats to the families, wealth and safety of (White) people. Unlike other royal wives, headlines and articles about Markle regularly employ language associated with criminality and violence, using words such as 'attack,' 'greedy,' 'aggressive,' 'cruel,' 'scary,' and 'manipulative', further harming Markle's perceived trustworthiness in the eyes of the public. As a result, even Markle's own attempts to speak for herself are met with skepticism or, in some cases, completely disregarded.

In 2018, global headlines were made that "greedy" Markle had made "poor" [Princess] Kate cry in a jealous rage over a tiara, terrifying onlookers. Despite no evidence, and a clear refutation of the story by Markle and other witnesses, the story was nevertheless impactful and disseminated worldwide.

Audiences have always enjoyed a palace scandal. Yet it is unique in Markle's case that even those not usually engaged with royal news seemed to find it entirely believable that Markle was not only uncouth (like other 'commoner' wives) but actually dangerous.

One *Daily Express* headline from 2021 is notable for its histrionics. Published at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and amidst a cost of living crisis in Britain, "Worst Royal Crisis in 85 Years" instead referred to Markle's "bombshell" interview with Oprah Winfrey, in which she shared her experience as the subject of racism within the royal institution. To put this into context, bear in mind that in the preceding 85 years the British monarchy faced crises including World War II, the Falklands War, the Northern Ireland Troubles, the attempted kidnapping of Princess Anne and the untimely death of Princess Diana – all of which evidently paled in comparison to the danger of two Black women in honest conversation.

In Australia, women's magazines began to speculate about their beloved Princess Diana's youngest son. Despite his wealth, power and privilege, they suggested, Prince Harry was a powerless victim of his wife's manipulation. Media outlets captioned paparazzi pictures of Prince Harry with captions of 'help me', 'save me', or emotive language like 'desperate plea', 'flee', and 'heartbroken prince'. Markle, it appeared, proposed a risk not only to the heart of the motherless Prince, but to the stability of the Commonwealth as a whole.

To bolster the language used in media coverage implying Markle's nefarious motivations, photographs

were often utilised of her frowning or with her mouth open, signifying aggressive or angry behaviour, while smiling pictures were captioned as 'smug' or 'smirking'. In contrast, Princess Kate and Prince Harry were imaged as frightened, distressed or vulnerable. In this way, audiences were couched to interpret appearances and body language to align with stereotypes and respond in kind, seemingly in sympathy to Markle's perceived victims.

Timing has been a crucial factor in how coverage of Markle has diverged from that of her white counterparts. Since 2016, media headlines have been set against a backdrop of heightened social and racial tensions and growing acceptance of hate speech in Western culture, influenced by Brexit, the election of President Trump, and events like the tragic Grenfell Towers fire. Additionally, the modern 24/7 digital news cycle has influenced how audiences consume and spread news through their social media channels. Ignoring formal journalistic standards of accuracy or ethics, unsubstantiated negative media claims about Markle could thus become widely accepted as truths simply through their volume and ease of sharing.

As Markle's fame has grown, so has her public unpopularity; she has become a media phenomenon that is invaluable to the same media outlets and consumers that demonise her. Interest in Markle has been directly linked to a recent upswing in women's magazine readership in Australia. Meanwhile, since 2021 the *Mail Online* (the global aggregate of *The Daily Mail*) has overtaken the *New York Times* to become the most popular news publication on the planet. Markle is the *Mail*'s most popular subject: they published nearly 1700 stories about her in 2023.

While no celebrity should be beyond journalistic criticism, the onslaught of racialised media coverage against Markle appears to abhor her existence as a Black woman taking up space in the elite world of British royalty. In effect, this type of coverage seeks to reinforce social inequities rather than challenge power structures. The collective willingness to *believe* and disseminate specific tropes about the biracial Duchess reflects how ingrained racist stereotyping can be.

Media coverage of Meghan Markle can be seen as an example of how meaning can be constructed to serve particular purposes. It raises ethical questions for both media and consumers, who together can cause harm and perpetuate injustices like racism, in the name of producing or consuming celebrity content. Responding to racially-coded imagery and language, digital consumers may feel justified in participating in vitriol against Markle – perceiving themselves to be acting upon family values or morality. The Angry Black Woman Trope in media coverage can be linked to ongoing stereotypes that result in far poorer outcomes for Black women than their White counterparts, in many areas including job security and safety, but particularly in health and maternal care. Likewise, public outcry against Markle since 2016 has not been limited to online comment sections or letters to magazine editors. In 2022, the British Metropolitan Police confirmed that they continued to navigate multiple 'active and credible death threats' against Markle and her children, including by neo-Nazi groups. Racialised media coverage has challenging and potentially tragic real-life outcomes not only for celebrities like Meghan Markle, but for many Black women and minoritised people.



Image: eNCA, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Communication DIY

What caption would you give the image above?

'Meghan Markle listens intently to a guide during a Royal museum visit'
or
'Meghan Markle caught sulking again! Duchess scowls at an elderly gentleman while poor Harry fights to hide his embarrassment at wife's behaviour during Royal museum visit'

How could a different choice of wording change how this image of Meghan Markle is perceived by an audience? If you were a media outlet, which headline would you use to capture more viewers?

About the author

Kelsey Avalon is a Maori-Australian Communications professional in the not-for-profit sector. Now based in Wadawarrung country, Kelsey has spent several years working and volunteering with women-led community organisations in different parts of the world including Peru, Egypt and Northern Ireland. Kelsey published her first book in 2016 and is currently pursuing a double Masters Degree in Counselling and Communications.

Ahead in Chapter 5...

Case study – Media representation of women in sport

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN SPORT

Deanne Firth

In 1985 the Australian Government established a working group to report on Women, Sport and the Media (ASC 1985). It is now nearly 40 years since their report was published, yet the same issues around media coverage and communication still occur. This case study looks at some examples of the way the media frames women in sport and how the language used downplays its importance.

Fink (2015:334) found that "highly accomplished female athletes are often 'infantilized' by sport commentators by referring to them as 'girls' or 'young ladies", however you don't hear male athletes being referred to as boys. This extends to the use of first names instead of last names by commentators, the first being more casual/amateurish and the last name more serious/professional. During the 1996 Olympic Games Fink's study (2015: 334) found "female gymnasts were referred to by their first names 177 times compared to only 16 times for male athletes". This improved by the year 2000 where it reduced to 104 times for female gymnasts, although still 50% more than was used for male gymnasts (Fink 2015: 334). So, whilst there has been an improvement there is still a way to go. Female athletes deserve the same respect from commentators as male athletes do.

Similarly, "sports commentators during telecasts often engage in gender marking for women's events" but don't for men's events (Fink 2015: 334). Gender marking refers to statements like, she is a great *women's* tennis player, rather than simply saying she is a great tennis player. The way sporting women are framed gives a subconscious message "that their activity is not intrinsically as worthy or important as men's sport" (ASC 1985:32).

A clear example of this bias is seen in the commentary of marathons whereby both women and men run at the same time on the same course. Commentators compare the first female to the male athletes that have beaten her, after which "gender comparisons for the rest of the race vanish", and there is no emphasis on all the men the female athlete has beaten (Fink 2015: 335).



Image by Thomas Wolter from Pixabay

In tennis the media commonly use phrases like, 'anything can happen in women's sport' implying inconsistent performance by female players, whereas a study by Tejkalova and Kristoufek (2021: 743,7 56) analysed 225,000 tennis matches between 1968 and 2018 and demonstrated that female players were more consistent than males.

When the media describes sportswomen, Toffoletti (2016: 204) found they are spoken of "in terms of their physical attributes rather than athletic achievements" and that this language devalues "their contributions and reassert(s) their inferiority to male athletes". Images of women athletes have a tendency to show them "as passive glamourous posing models" not "active strong female athletes" (Mikosza and Phillips 1999: 14).

Television coverage of women's sport has been surveyed for government reports and in 1988, 1992 and 1996 constitued between 1.2% and 2% of total television sport (Phillips 1997: 13). Alarmingly in 2014 Vann stated that although women's sport participation in Australia is high and in fact outpaces men's participation, "it only receives 9% of all sports coverage in print, radio and television combined" (2014 :438, 440).

Not only is the coverage amount less, the positioning also demonstrates a lack of importance. For example, Phillips (1997:8) found that "91.8% of all stories on the back page" of newspapers "were devoted to male sports", the back page being prime positioning. Lead stories on news sport segments tended to cover males and in fact Phillips (1997: 12, 14) noticed that commercial networks talk about international sports like American baseball more than Australian women's sporting achievements and during the survey

period a program talked about "guinea pig racing for more than six minutes" yet on the same show the only women's sport mentioned had 15 seconds of airtime.

Even when women's sport is covered, the leading stories that are longer and have "better production values" are focused on male sports, while the highlight reels and sports statistics that scroll below the screen focus on male sports (Toffoletti 2016: 200). The actual production techniques utilized for men's and women's sport are markedly different – this includes the positioning and number of cameras used, and can "result in rendering women's sport as less important and exciting" (Fink 2015: 335). For example, the women's beach volleyball uniform rules restrict the female athletes to tiny bikinis, whereas the males wear loose board shorts. Additionally, an analysis of camera angles in women's beach volleyball by Fink (2015: 335) shows them used to "emphasize women's chests and buttocks" with male athletes getting "more variation in field of view". This is outrageous sexism; coverage of women's sport needs to focus on the athleticism of the women not their buttocks.

Consistency of programming and commentary is also pertinent. There needs to be consistency of programming times to allow an audience to build up as well as quality of camera and production. Symons et al (2022: 58) found that "haphazard" coverage makes it difficult for the "audience to know where and how to regularly access" the content. Every night during the footy season there are a number of AFL shows dedicated to reviewing the matches, discussing team selection, and interviewing players. Some examples are *Before the Game*, *The Bounce*, *Talking Footy* and *The Front Bar*. These shows raise the profiles of players, encourage engagement, and build audiences. There is a lack of regular commentary and review shows about women's sport.

Due to the lack of mainstream media coverage of women's sport, alternative media is an option not only to build an audience but also to expand coverage quickly and cheaply. However, there is a downside to using alternative media. The biggest issue with alternative media isn't cost, production or content but online misogynistic abuse (Kavanagh et al 2019: 557). Alternative media needs constant monitoring as online discussions are "much more aggressive and often quite hateful" (Bird 2011: 498). Measures also need to be taken to protect from online threats to allow the building of an audience using alternative media while protecting female athletes, as Kavanagh et al found (2019: 568) when women read the posts, they don't get a warning and they can experience fear and anxiety about their safety. Everyone needs to be safe in their workplace and whilst alternative media is a solution it needs to be explored with safeguards in place to protect athletes from abuse.

Media coverage of women's sport is affecting the public perception of how important it is, and the seriousness with which these talented athletes are taken. If something is featured more prominently or frequently the audience are invited to regard it as more important. Alternative media is an option not only to build an audience but also to expand coverage quickly and cheaply. To ensure there is an equal playing field for women in sport both in Australia and around the world, change should be made.

About the author

Deanne Firth FCA is the Founder and Director of Tactical Super, an award-winning chartered accounting firm specialising in audit. Deanne imparts her knowledge by speaking at a variety of conferences and webinars on superannuation and taxation. Deanne is one of the authors of two international best-selling books: *Better Business, Better Life, Better World* and *Legacy*, which feature advice on building a business for good in line with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Ahead in Chapter 5...

Case study – the semiology of protests in Paris

FLAMING BINS AND BEHEADED EFFIGIES: THE SEMIOLOGY OF RECENT PROTESTS IN PARIS

Grace Johnson

French history is punctuated by revolutions and uprisings, protests and demonstrations, furore and outcries. Their spirit seems to be one of revolution and political dissent, famously embodied by the French Revolution of 1789, and continuing through the twentieth century to May 1968.

Today, it seems that little has changed. Protests and strikes continually appear in the news. Recent social turmoil culminated in huge mobilisations across France to counter the pension reform, particularly in Paris. Starting in January 2023, over 10,000 tonnes of rubbish were left on the streets in the country's capital. Bins were lit on fire, tourist locations were filled with black piles of extinguished waste, and rental bikes melted on street curbs like Dali's watches.

President Emmanuel Macron's changes to the retirement age were not welcome, to say the least. Prime Minister's Élisabeth Borne's use of Article 49.3 to push through the bill to bypass a vote was seen as an assault on democracy, and Macron's pension reform itself was seen as yet another strike to social equality by a leader who is often accused of being the 'president of the rich,' and thus worryingly out of touch with the lower social classes of France.

Media coverage was often at the forefront of drawing links between the present-day protests and France's revolutionary past. For example, in an article that focuses on the protests at Place de la Bastille, a symbolic site where the Bastille prison was destroyed during the Revolution, it was reported that "many [protestors] held posters with a montage of Macron dressed in full regalia in the manner of 'Sun King' Louis XIV, accompanied by the slogan '*Méprisant de la République*' (contemptuous of the Republic)" (Dodman 2023).

Furthermore, during the pension reform protests, protestors often made links between current events and those of the past – some posters referenced beheadings, especially that of Louis XVI, the last king of France, and effigies of Macron were filmed being thrown into the fires or beheaded.

Protestors also gathered in historically significant places in Paris, such as Place de la Concorde, where Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were executed by guillotine. One article drew clear links between the current protests and the revolutions of the past: "Scenes in the French capital have at times been reminiscent of '*Les Misérables,*' with almost nightly protests, barricades of rotting bin bags and a spirit bordering on revolutionary" (Calcutt & Webber 2023). Social media gained its own momentum with platforms like Twitter (now "X") circulating countless photos of battle-like scenes, capturing violent clashes between protestors and police riot squads, complete with fires and faceless figures amidst the smoke bombs and unsettling red lights.

The references to the 1789 French Revolution, threats of recreating the May 1968 protests, media

language of battle, war, and revolution, the focus on police violence, protest banners with recycled messages, and signs inspired by Internet memes, are all part of a well-established lexicon of protest and social dissent. Although the recent protests and strikes have distinguished themselves by their cause and sheer force, they nonetheless function in a historical context and rely on a shared language, both written and visual. Political discontent lines the streets in the form of ten-thousand tonnes of uncollected rubbish; the crowd's anger manifests as fires in the streets. Yet this is not so abnormal once we understand that it is rooted in the history and culture, even normalised. Roland Barthes (1972) might have called it naturalisation or the creation of a myth, calling for a semiological analysis of these images ripe with meaning. Or we might think of them instead as signs, each with their own significations.

O'Shaugnessy, Stadler and Casey explain that a 'sign' is a "stand-in for or representation of something else – the meaning, concept, or idea to which it refers" (2016: 123). Each sign consists of the signifier (the form used to convey the meaning) and the signified (the concept that is communicated). These messages use codes and conventions to communicate meaning, which ultimately depend on cultural knowledge. But it isn't enough to recognise the sign and be able to read the 'code' – it is necessary to know what a sign *signifies*.

An understanding of what codes and signs truly communicate is what Roland Barthes sought to explore in his book *Mythologies* (1972), originally published in 1957. Barthes aimed to deconstruct the myth of France, looking at a range of subjects like wine and milk, soap-powders and detergents, and striptease, and investigating how these 'myths' were constructed by social values. He expanded upon Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916) system of sign analysis, limited to linguistics, by interpreting cultural phenomena as 'codes.' In his semiological approach, Barthes added another level to the Saussurian model by exploring how cultural codes and phenomena are then elevated to the level of myth. Barthes argues that the connection between the signifier and the signified is collectively formed and over time becomes naturalised. The myth itself becomes a mode of signification, one that takes over normal language and rather speaks through intention than by literal senses.



Photo by Florian Wehde on Unsplash. What is the meaning of "France"? Where does that meaning come from?

If we return to the protests, we might begin to see deeper into their significations. The repeated images and phrases of 'fire,' for example, suggest destruction. The sight of a building on fire, as we saw in the media during the Paris protests, indicates the collapse of a structure, especially one that was made to last for a long time. Using fire as a weapon signifies a force that spreads and cannot be easily controlled. But fire might also be understood as a hopeful image – of new life rising from the ashes, for instance.

Barthes (1972: 113) argues that a sign elevates to a myth when it becomes accepted as universal – "the associative total of a concept and an image". The myth 'naturalises' the sign and its meanings (Barthes 1972:113). This process of transformation and naturalisation for Barthes means that "myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it things lose the memory that they once were made" (Barthes 1972: 143). Particularities are then appropriated in a sense and adopted into a general view. A pattern begins to take place, one abundant with repetitions and stereotypes, turns of phrases and predictable cadences. If we apply this to the media reporting on the recent protests in Paris, and the recurring images of those protests, we see that fundamental messages are repeated and even expected. What was perhaps at one point idiosyncratic has now been 'normalised' to the state of mythology.

In Wilson's article on political demonstrations in France, he emphasises the connection between historical revolts and protests in modern times. For him, the slogans, the songs, and the tactics have been used for decades, perhaps centuries, and are thus deeply rooted in the past. As he says, "there is room for innovation but always within the traditions of the past that confer legitimacy upon political action

and evoke deep emotions among the participants" (Wilson 1994: 35). In other words, the protestors' idiosyncratic communication is rooted in a shared cultural history. This is not a mistake – "conformity to tradition is deliberate and self-conscious ... such protest features enable participants to share vicariously in the glorious events of the past" (Wilson 1994: 35). There is undoubtedly a sense of satisfaction and shared participation in expressing insolence and anger towards the government. Beheading effigies of the president reinforces the feeling of power amongst the participants and reminds an onlooking society of their democratic ideals, as well as their determination to fight any threats against them. Ultimately, the messages embodied in the signs and symbols of the recent Paris protests communicate just as much, if not more, than the protests themselves.

About the author

Grace Jing Johnson was born in Sydney and has an academic background in classical music, literature and communications. Most recently, she was living in France and undertaking her Masters studies when protests erupted across the country, leading her to undertake this semiological study of French protest culture.

Ahead in Chapter 5...

Chapter 5 wrap-up

CHAPTER 5 WRAP-UP

You have now finished Chapter 5.

In the next chapter, we'll consider how we make meaning about *ourselves* when we explore **identity**.

Things to think about...

We've seen in this chapter that **framing analysis** can help us see how meanings are made through communication. As communicators, we can also **reframe** issues and work for social change.

Think of a change you'd like to see in society.

What do people already think about this issue? (To answer this, you can conduct some quick desktop research and/or use your imagination!)

What *new ways of thinking* do you want to encourage about this issue?

What *communication* will help you achieve this – what will your communication strategy look like?

Now think back to the previous chapter – how can you apply storytelling tactics in your communication strategy?

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PART VI

CHAPTER 6: IDENTITY

WHAT IS IDENTITY?

Identity is an essential part of communication studies. Why? Because everything we investigate in this discipline relates to us, to you, to our selves. As we saw in the previous chapter, we can *represent* and *be represented by* others; similarly, we have our own identities but we can also be *identified* by others. When we communicate, we often engage in a practice of shaping meaning about ourselves; we also, always, communicate from our own position, our standpoint, within social worlds.

In academia, we talk about our own **positionality** and how it informs our research – we ask, how does my identity inform the way I design research projects, the types of research questions I ask, the types of methods I use and the findings I uncover? Rather than try to erase our identities or remove them from our work as researchers, we develop awareness of *where we are coming from* when we approach a particular idea, theory, or research problem.

Meanwhile, industry is looking for people who can think critically and reflexively about their own identities and their own media practices. Why? Because people with these skills can lead innovation and help communicators reach new audiences.

Identities matter, and identities are communicated. Your identity will also shape and inform your audience practices and your reception of media messages, from your favourite character in the latest Netflix drama to your interpretation of an ad campaign to who you follow on social media (and how, or whether, you use social media in the first place).

Your identity might encompass your habits as a viewer or listener, as well as what you pay attention to and how you design the media mix of your own engagement with culture and knowledge. As we'll see in the sections ahead, your identity may involve **fan practices** – you may be a fan of a person, a story, or a brand. Fandom is not just a feeling, it's a form of expression, often defined by active and creative responses to texts. Often, too, fandom is a collective as well as an individual identity: it involves membership of a community, a relationship not just with a cultural object but with other fans.

In other words, communication, media, and popular culture play a role in the formation of our identities. The choices we make about what to pay attention to and how we make and use "meaning" are a crucial part of this process. At the same time, we use media tools to communicate, curate, and transform aspects of our identities – often in very public-facing ways.

Things to think about...

Think of an object that represents an aspect of your identity. What would you choose? Perhaps it would depend on whether you had to share your response and in what context...

So what is "identity"?

There are different ways of responding to that question, and different theoretical lenses we can apply when we do so.

We may think of identity in terms of our authentic sense of self. When defining **authenticity**, the philosopher Charles Taylor referred to our unique "way of being human" (1992: 15). We might think of identity in these terms – our unique way of being ourselves; our inner sense of who we are.

Your identity may refer to the core components or "ingredients" of who you are. Academic and author Maha Bali used this food-related metaphor when she shared the image below in a blog post titled "ingredients of me".



Image by Maha Bali, CC BY-NC 4.0, https://blog.mahabali.me/just-for-fun/ingredients-of-me/

Your identity is indeed made up of key components, or "ingredients", such as your age, your gender, your race and ethnicity, your religious affiliation, your political beliefs and alignments, your occupation, your interests, and your cultural tastes. These demographic factors would be of interest to communicators who are trying to "identify" and reach *you* as part of a target audience. But these different aspects or components of your identity also *intersect*. Later in this chapter you'll hear more about **intersectionality**, a term that refers to the way overlapping aspects of identity can contribute to marginalisation and even persecution. So your identity also relates to how you are treated within society and how you fit within interlocking systems of power.

Identity is a construction – we learn about and build our identities through interactions with other people, with institutions and cultural groups, and with media and popular culture. And identity is a performance – your identity may change (or be performed differently) depending on who you are with.

In a book called *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1956, the American sociologist Erving Goffman used the analogy of a theatre stage to describe the performance of identity in face-to-

face communication. His thoughts on the "back stage" and "front stage" regions of identity expression have become frequently cited, including in studies of digital and virtual lives. Goffman argued that when we are socially interacting with someone, or when we know someone is watching, we occupy the "front stage" region and engage in front stage behaviour; when we prepare for these interactions, or when we are privately just being ourselves, we are "back stage". From this perspective, we are the roles we play – our front and back stage performances constitute our selves.

In this chapter, we'll consider how identity relates to communication. We'll take these different ways of looking at identity and apply them as we explore branding, digital identities, and a range of student-led case studies.

In this chapter...

Identity, branding, and persona

Generational and digital identities

Case study – Everything Everywhere All At Once: an autoethnography of a "typical" Asian

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Chapter 6 wrap-up

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IDENTITY, BRANDING, AND PERSONA

The idea of identity as a construction and a performance is central to **branding**. Top performing global brands have instantly recognisable identities that have been carefully crafted over long periods of time.

One of the main functions of commercial branding is to create or manufacture a sense of difference – to make a product stand out from other products. This is achieved by attaching a collection of meanings to the brand: it is a **semiotic** process. Brands work through association: they borrow and appropriate cultural meaning from other things.

A brand identity can also be *changed* when the associations that make up that identity are redefined or reconfigured. We usually refer to this process as **rebranding**, and it can be a way of reaching a new audience, recovering from scandal, or revitalising a brand that has been fading. Back in 2010, the award-winning "Smell Like a Man, Man" ad campaign achieved this with much aplomb for the Old Spice brand, bringing youthful humour and verve to a fragrance previously associated with older men. Audiences can even be recruited into the construction of brand identities through processes of participatory branding – this relates to what we'll explore in Chapter 8.



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'The man your man could smell like' | Old Spice

Celebrities, too, have identities that they cultivate and manage, as do influencers and public figures of all kinds. They may even lend their identity to the construction of a commercial brand through a process of celebrity endorsement. The most effective celebrities will maintain a consistent identity across all their public appearances, from films to advertisements to interviews to their own use of social media (or the social media content that is produced for them).

Audiences, meanwhile, can relate to celebrities through fandom. **Parasocial relations** is a term used to describe the imagined, one-way relationship one experiences with a celebrity or public persona, although these days, the imagined aspect of that relationship may be transcended if we *actually* interact with a celebrity, influencer, or public figure on social media. Nevertheless, the persona with whom we interact is carefully constructed and fabricated – as is our own, to a certain extent.

In the work of academics David Marshall and Kim Barbour, the word "persona" refers to the "presentation of the self". You may feel that you have a **persona** – and perhaps celebrity culture has

influenced, or even provided you with a template for, the way you think about this presentation of yourself. Barbour et al. (2014) argue that the idea of "persona" is more relevant than ever before because, thanks to online culture, "greater aspects of our lives are now involved in public displays, mediated displays, and a peculiar new blend of interpersonal and presentational constructions of identities and selves". They write:

> Persona functions like the construct or automated script that we assemble to interact with the world with on our behalf. This involves the technologies of computation and mediation and their interfaces that function to automate, produce and filter communication with us; email, blogs, Twitter accounts, and so on. (Barbour et al. 2014)

The idea of persona therefore encompasses the way we perform ourselves to others as well as the traces we leave in digital spaces and even the moments when identity is something that "happens to us" – the moments that are out of our control, such as when we are tagged by someone on social media.

Things to think about...

Does the word "persona" resonate with the way you think about your identity? What about the word "brand"? Do you feel that you have a personal or professional "brand"? What sort of work goes into the construction and maintenance of this brand?

Ahead in Chapter 6...

Generational and digital identities

GENERATIONAL AND DIGITAL IDENTITIES

Identities are also generational. Depending on your age, you may be a baby boomer or a millennial, or a member of Generation X or Generation Z. These identity bundles, so to speak, are brimming with meanings that are of interest to social analysts and marketers alike.

Let's consider the generational labels "millennial" and "Gen Z". The term "millennial" is usually understood to include people born from 1981 to 1996, who in 2023, at the time of writing this book, are aged between 27 and 42. The oldest millennials became adults at the turn of the millennium in the year 2000. Generation Z, in turn, is the label for those born between 1997 and 2012.

Both these demographic labels come with their own understandings and assumptions about the practices, behaviours, and attitudes of young people. In particular, young adults are often defined in relation to digital technologies. The young people of the twenty-first century are sometimes conceptualised as "digital natives", a term popularised by American writer Marc Prensky in 2001. Prensky described digital natives as the first generation to grow up surrounded by digital technology and as "'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet", unlike digital immigrants, who "speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age)" (2001: 1-2).

You've probably heard the term "digital native" before. It's become a convenient descriptor for the way young people use – and, increasingly, rely on – digital media tools and platforms. In her study of the news practices of 18 to 30-year-olds, Kirsten Eddy (2022) further differentiates between "digital natives" (25-34-year-olds) and "social natives" (18-24-year-olds), the latter having grown up surrounded by social as well as digital media.

But as an identity marker, the term "digital native" is fraught with problems. Most notably, as boyd (2014: 176) has pointed out, it is problematic to assume that children who grow up surrounded by digital technologies and devices have the knowledge or competencies to make the most of them. To assume that all young media consumers are engaging equally with digital content is to lose sight of the **digital divide** (see Chapter 8) and the related understanding that one's geographic location, cultural background, education status, and family environment can limit or enable digital proficiency, even if one is young.

Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that both millennials and Generation Z have grown up with access to digital, interactive modes of communication. For many young people today, new cultural systems enabled by social networking media mean that identity is no long stable, nor singular, but continually transformed through the ways we are represented online.



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

No matter our age or affiliation with (or rejection of) a particular generational label, digital practices play a role in the construction of our identities. Even if we abstain from digital media, we define ourselves through that deliberate act of resistance. If we *do* engage with digital practices and digital cultures, and if we perform ourselves in virtual spaces, we can explore this aspect of our identities by asking ourselves questions like these:

Does social media help us express, articulate, or perform certain aspects of our authentic selves?

Does social media help us perform or participate in aspects of our culture?

Is there a difference between real and virtual identities? We might have an "online self" and that self might be carefully curated – is this online self less authentic and real than our offline or embodied self? Can we even distinguish between the online and the offline self? Is there a spillover between real and virtual worlds?

Are digital technologies a disrupter or an enabler of our identities? When you ponder this topic you might be automatically drawn to the way social and digital media have *strengthened* your identity – but are there any instances when digital technology has *disrupted or upset* your sense of self? Maybe there are types of digital media that you avoid for this reason. You might have built your own patterns of media consumption strategically around what supports and confirms your identity.

There is no longer a neat divide between our private and our public selves, and there is no longer a neat divide between our personal and our professional lives. What impact does this have?

What about the information that is collected about us by others – what aspects of your identity are owned and controlled by others including media companies? Our cultural tastes can contribute to our identity, but they can also help to identify us in a way that benefits others. So who are you according to Google, Facebook, Netflix... or Spotify?

Every year since 2016, millions of Spotify subscribers have had their identities formulated, packaged, and re-presented to them in the form of "Spotify Wrapped". At once a service and a marketing campaign, Spotify Wrapped is a summary of its users' behaviour during the year, typically presented in December.

Spotify describes this service – somewhat paradoxically – as a "deeper look into your listening", and invites users to share their "wrapped" profile with friends; indeed, the identity package is made for social media sharing, in a way that furthers the Spotify brand while also allowing users to exercise self-branding

(in this case, identifying oneself by revealing one's musical tastes). The process benefits and furthers the brands of musical artists, and has also become something of an end-of-year ritual for both Spotify users and media commentators: a quick Google search will show you that Spotify Wrapped is the subject of many a year's-end news story. For example, in 2023 the ABC asked us to identify ourselves as a particular *type* of Spotify Wrapped user, while this article for The Guardian describes the process as a "creepy, meaningless" reminder of "just how much data big tech has on you".

What does this tell us? There is a tangled relationship between identity, communication, digital cultures, fan practices, and commercial brands. We'll delve more deeply into these tangles in the case studies ahead.

Ahead in Chapter 6...

Case study – Everything Everywhere All At Once: an autoethnography of a "typical" Asian

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A "TYPICAL" ASIAN

Ngoc Linh Nguyen

As an Asian moviegoer with no expertise in art, the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All At Once* resonated with me and prompted me to reflect on my identity. This unconventional film explores the life of an Asian-American family, touching on East-meets-West philosophies (Huynh 2022). It made me consider the influence of media on real life, particularly about my media consumption.

A friend recommended that I try *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, a sci-fi adventure film that I would not usually choose to watch. Little did I know that this movie would leave such a deep impression on me. In the film, Michelle Yeoh plays Evelyn Quan Wang, a Chinese-American who navigates through parallel universes to save the world from cosmic peril. The film's portrayal of the journey across different realities, where everyday struggles are juxtaposed with fantastical scenarios, sparked many thoughts and a deeper connection to my Asian heritage. This connection exceeded what I had anticipated.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://deakin.pressbooks.pub/communicationconcepts/?p=142#oembed-1

Everything Everywhere All At Once | Official Trailer | A24

Everything Everywhere All At Once captured my attention with its well-developed characters and intricate relationships that reflect my Asian identity (Krishnamoorthy et al. 2023). The movie explores the generational trauma between a close-minded mother, Evelyn, and her depressed daughter, Joy. This heart-wrenching tension resonated with my countless conversations with parents about important life decisions.

The film also unpacks life's complexities through the concept of *verse-jumping*, a metaphor for the *what-ifs* in life. Evelyn's encounters with her alternate selves, including a martial artist and a movie star, emphasize the film's meditation on choice and destiny. The line, 'I saw my life without you. I wish you could have seen it. It was... beautiful,' accentuates the film's central theme. It reminds us of the possible life trajectories that we may have taken and encourages introspection when facing significant decisions, such

as my move from Vietnam to Australia. The movie's concept of a surreal multiverse piques our inherent curiosity about different life paths, fate and will.

Everything Everywhere All At Once combines a captivating storyline with breathtaking visuals, showcasing the contrast between two worlds. Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, the movie directors, go beyond traditional storytelling to create a stunning collage of universes that challenge the mundane (Flux 2022). From Evelyn's monotonous daily life to the vibrant and otherworldly landscapes of alternate realities, the movie enhances cinematic artistry (Reklis 2022).

One of the film's most exciting scenes features an alternate reality in which human genetics evolved bizarrely to hot dog fingers, revealing the essence of life – love. This absurdity and the characters' acceptance enlightened viewers about meaningful lessons in our life. The most potent universe is a lifeless planet where the main characters, represented as rocks with googly eyes, communicate in silence. This simple yet surprisingly effective approach cuts through the heart of their relationship struggles in communication.

The movie reaffirms the idea that cinema can both amuse and encourage profound personal contemplation. As I continue to engage with the film and its themes about generational trauma, the regret burden and the meaning of life, I discover profound revelations about my Asian cultural background (Lee 2023). The film's unique and eclectic choices in set design and cinematography provide a visual feast, enhancing the Asian-American experiences with a surreal twist (Scott 2022). This creative presentation makes the film's core themes visually mesmerizing and emotionally influential.

My fandom experience with *Everything Everywhere All At Once* has been filled with excitement, curiosity, and personal connection. By joining online forums, I have explored the film's artistry with hidden Easter eggs, engaged with fans, and analyzed its nuances (Jenkins 2017). These discussions have broadened my perspectives and challenged me to think critically about the film's storytelling.

Furthermore, watching YouTube interviews with the cast deepened my appreciation for the film's creation. Rewatching the film multiple times has offered me new insights – from my initial exposure to the characters to catching subtle details I initially missed, developing a deeper emotional connection. The film's sweep of the 2023 Oscar Awards, especially Michelle Yeoh's win for Best Actress, felt like a triumph. It symbolized a second chance for Asian artists in Hollywood and served as an inspiration for women everywhere.

As an Asian woman, I deeply related to the daughter in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. The film profoundly explored intersectionality and resonated with me on various levels, including my gender, age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. The film's metaverse concept is a powerful metaphor for the overwhelming nature of the digital age, where we are inundated with endless information and alternate realities, like the protagonist Evelyn. Through the portrayal of whiplash and contradictions experienced by Evelyn, the film conveys human struggles and the quest to remain rooted in our cultural identity amidst the chaos of the digital world.

The movie also examines the mother-daughter relationship, highlighting the challenges of empathy, understanding, and communication across generational divides. As an Asian viewer, Evelyn's conflicts with her family, particularly the heartfelt dialogue with her daughter, evokes my thoughts. "You can go anywhere to become anything that you want. Why are you still staying here with me?" – "Because I love you." This

interaction illuminates the often-unseen efforts of our parents to connect with us despite their limitations and our shared cultural gaps.

The film also features Evelyn's dynamic with her husband, Waymond, revealing a secret power in overcoming life hardships. Initially, Evelyn perceives her husband as someone who has never supported her, but as the story unfolds, she discovers his own way to fight. Waymond has disguised the fact that kindness is the strongest superpower against the chaos we may encounter in life. "When I choose to see the good side of things, I am not being naïve. It is strategic and necessary. It is how I have learned to survive through everything." It is not about nihilism, but absurdism (Goldman 2023). When nothing matters, the essence of life lies in how we treat each other, or in another words, at our heart and mind.

I found *Everything Everywhere All at Once* to be an intense reflection on intersectionality and the Asian-American experience. It invites viewers to challenge their preconceived notions about the Asian community and their place within it. Through its narrative and character development, imbued with an Asian perspective, the film advocates for a reassessment of our cultural beliefs and the power of our choices in shaping our lives.

About the author

Ngoc Linh Nguyen is a dedicated learner in the Master of Communication with a focus on Digital Media, commencing in 2023. At the time of writing, she has garnered four years of marketing experience in both global agency and in-house settings. Currently contributing to the marketing team of Australia's largest independent research company, Ngoc Linh values the blend of academic pursuits and real-world insights gained throughout her professional journey.

Ahead in Chapter 6...

Case study – My identity as a K-pop fan

MY IDENTITY AS A K-POP FAN

Lily Huynh

During almost 23 years of my life, finding answers to questions like "Who am I?" and "Why do I exist?" has proven challenging. Some people have been acutely aware of themselves since they were in their twenties, while others spend their whole lives finding their unique way of being human.

I was born during the generational transition from digital immigrants to digital natives (Prensky 2001). Even though Vietnam, my home country, officially connected to the global Internet network in 1997, it wasn't until I turned 13 that I had my first Facebook account. Since then, internet and technological devices have partially shaped and changed my mindset, creating who I am today.

This case study delves into my identity as a fan of Red Velvet, a Korean pop (K-pop) idol group.

I still remember vividly the first time I heard about K-pop, through an out-dated television when I was 10 years old, thanks to my cousin. After buying one of the first DVDs of her favourite K-pop boy band, she gathered some kids in my neighbourhood and displayed the disc with excitement and a dedicated explanation. Their energy, catchy music, and attractive images from the video awakened my curiosity as a ten-year-old kid and made me start admiring someone called "celebrity".

Even though Red Velvet is not my first favourite K-pop idol, I engage with them the most and consider myself as a "true fan" of them. As a person who is easily moved by beauty, I was impressed by the elegance of one Red Velvet member named Irene, who is also the reason why I spent more time doing research about Red Velvet and becoming their fan. In fact, Irene is often praised as the epitome of the Korean beauty standard, as her face has all the features the Korean beauty standard looks for. However, I contend that creating a standardised image for all idols in the Korean-pop cultural industry through the use of similar makeup looks and fashion styles has resulted in a homogenisation of their appearances and restricted their diversity.

Starting with Irene, I started reading information about Red Velvet and watching their videos on YouTube in order to get an overview of who they are and the genre of their music. As a person who always loves to be creative, their music genres and concepts have never disappointed me. I love the way they are not afraid to try new things and take risks with their music and visuals, which keeps fans intrigued and interested in their comebacks. Naturally, I participated in their fan club pages on Facebook, followed their Instagram, and subscribed to their YouTube channel.



NINE STARS, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Official fan club names hold significant importance in the K-pop industry. Red Velvet and their company took a unique approach to naming their fan club that differs from other groups whose fandom names are typically assigned by the company. This approach not only made the naming process interesting, but also enhanced the interaction between the fans and the idols by giving fans the ability to define themselves. In January 2017, SM Entertainment announced that Red Velvet's fan club name would be decided by the fans themselves. Fans were asked to submit suggestions, and ultimately the fans themselves chose the name they deemed the best, resulting in "Reveluv". This unique approach not only allowed for greater fan engagement, but also provided an opportunity for fans to feel a sense of ownership and connection to the group.

According to research conducted by Riyanto (2020: 101), it was found that the characteristics of Reveluv fandom on Twitter can be divided into two identities: active fans (fans who consume and produce) and passive fans (fans who only act as consumers). Within the Reveluv fandom on Twitter, there are also active fans who enjoy fanart, fansites, fan projects, and trading cards. These fans actively produce and consume works such as fanart and fansites, which allows them to develop their hobbies in writing, drawing, and photography.

However, these days, fans not only create fan works but also turn them into commodities, such as Red Velvet-themed fanart and various fansite merchandise. Fans with these characteristics tend to have virtual identities, formed through their personal activities in finding fan works like fanart and fansites. Fans give meaning to their fandom through cultural activities that allow them to become more immersed in cyberspace activities as if they had their own world, including interacting with other fans about their works.

On the other hand, I personally consider myself as a passive fan, which suits my personality in my daily life. This type of fan refers to a term called **parasocial relationships**, the imagined or one-sided relationships we, as media users, form with celebrities or other media personalities. Riyanto (2020: 106) described passive fans as those who have a strong desire to keep up with the latest news and information about their favourite artists, including their personal lives, status updates, and creative output. This has become a regular part of their daily routine, as they turn to online media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter to access such information. These fans tend to consume rather than produce works such as fanfiction and fan books, but they do download them and enjoy them privately. Fans with these characteristics usually tend to have real identities because their identities as fans are formed through activities in an environment containing peers. Through interactions with peers, they are introduced to fanfiction and fan books.

Being a fan of something often involves being part of a community that forms a collective identity. Ultimately, I define myself as a fan of Red Velvet and a part of the Reveluv community. Instead of someone who invested a huge amount of money in consuming their idol's products and services, I support my idol by streaming the group's music, promoting their events and activities, and defending them against negative criticism. It is no doubt that the way fandom is practiced has now entered a new phase, where fans are not just consumers, but also producers. This practice reveals that the belief that internet devices only have negative effects on youth is not entirely accurate, as they can also have a positive impact if their creativity is properly channelled.

About the author

Lily Huynh, an avid communicator and educator from Vietnam, hails from a diverse background in education, event planning, and content creation. With rich experience as an English tutor and assistant, she has ventured into curating impactful content. Currently pursuing a Master's in communication with a focus on Public Relations, she bridges her academic pursuits with practical expertise, embodying the core concepts of effective communication.

Ahead in Chapter 6...

Case study – The paradox of authenticity in personal branding

THE PARADOX OF AUTHENTICITY IN PERSONAL BRANDING

Kym Lam Sam

Personal branding stands out as a concept of paramount importance and complexity in the intricate tapestry of modern communication. It is an art form, a strategic exercise in self-presentation and identity management, woven into the fabric of personal and professional spheres.

This concept hinges on the delicate balance between authenticity and performance—a paradox that challenges traditional self-expression and audience perception notions. Rampersad (2015: 15) claims that a personal brand should ideally reflect one's identity, infused with personal values and authenticity. However, this authenticity is not an isolated construct; it interacts continuously with the expectations and perceptions of the audience (Goffman 1959). This interaction creates a dynamic environment where personal branding becomes a self-reflective practice and a responsive and adaptive process.

Personal branding, in its essence, is a strategic act of communication where one's identity is curated and presented to the world, resonating with both emotional and rational perceptions (Jones 2017). However, this curation is influenced by the audience's expectations, creating a paradoxical situation where authenticity is self-expressed and audience-approved (Keller & Swaminathan 2019; Neumeier 2006). The notion of authenticity in personal branding thus becomes a dynamic interplay between self-perception and audience reception.

Goffman's (1959) theory of the presentation of self in everyday life aptly applies here, suggesting that our social interactions are a series of performances shaped by the environment and audience. In the context of personal branding, this means maintaining a balance between being true to oneself and adapting to the expectations and perceptions of the audience. It is about crafting a genuine and appealing narrative, ensuring consistency in communication across various platforms and interactions (Marwick 2013). This balance requires a deep understanding of both one's own identity and the audience's expectations, a skill vital for effective personal branding.



Image by Kym Lam Sam, created in 2023 using Nightcafe. No copyrighted images were used in the creation process.

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behaviour (Chandler 2022), offers profound insights into the nuances of personal branding. In branding oneself, every detail—from clothing choices to the tone of voice, from online profiles to business cards—functions as a sign, communicating layers of meaning. These signs are not static; their meanings can shift based on cultural contexts and individual experiences.

Therefore, understanding semiotics enables one to be more aware of the multifaceted nature of communication, recognising that personal branding extends far beyond verbal communication. It involves carefully orchestrating symbols and signs that form a brand image when decoded by the audience. This semiotic curation is particularly relevant in a digital age where visual and textual cues on social media platforms play a significant role in personal branding. An effective personal brand requires the right choice of symbols and an understanding how different audiences will likely interpret these symbols.

While not the primary focus here, the role of social media in personal branding is an important consideration. It acts as a global theatre where personal brands are performed and scrutinised. Social media amplifies personal branding challenges, making communication and performance more public and permanent (Santer et al. 2023). However, the essence of personal branding transcends social media platforms and resides in the ability to communicate effectively and authentically in a crowded and noisy marketplace.

Reconciling the paradox in personal branding involves acknowledging that while we strive for authenticity, we are invariably performing for an audience. This reconciliation starts with self-awareness and a clear understanding of one's values, beliefs, and strengths. It is about crafting a narrative that is

true to oneself yet adaptable to the audience's perceptions and expectations (Newman 2019). Authenticity in personal branding is about consistency in what one represents and communicates, ensuring that the performance is not a facade but a genuine representation of oneself.

Consistency, however, does not mean a rigid adherence to a static self-concept but rather an adaptive and reflective approach to how one is perceived and received by the audience. In this dance of authenticity and performance, sincerity becomes a guiding principle—being honest about one's intentions and transparent in interactions. By skilfully navigating this paradox, one can establish an authentic and resonant personal brand, bridging the gap between self-perception and audience reception.

Personal branding emerges as a complex interplay of authenticity and performance, where one's true self is revealed and shaped through interactions with the audience. This intricate dance highlights the importance of a nuanced understanding of communication, both verbal and non-verbal, as we navigate the semiotic landscape of personal branding. It is about striking a delicate balance, where the authentic self coexists with the inevitable performance required in social interactions. Therefore, personal branding is not just about self-presentation but about crafting a narrative that resonates with the individual and the audience while remaining adaptable and sincere. By embracing this paradox and understanding the multifaceted nature of communication, one can master the art of personal branding, creating a genuine and influential persona. The journey of personal branding, thus, becomes a testament to the power of communication and the dynamic nature of human interactions in shaping our perceptions and identities.

About the author

Kym Lam Sam, a dedicated brand strategist and coach from Brisbane, Australia, enriches the field with 15 years of industry experience. His passion lies in mentoring business leaders and helping them to articulate their brand's unique value proposition. Known for his insightful and collaborative approach, Kym excels in teaching effective brand control and success measurement techniques.

Ahead in Chapter 6...

Case study – Intersectionality and shaping meaning about ourselves

INTERSECTIONALITY AND SHAPING MEANING ABOUT OURSELVES

Sha Fallon

Intersectionality is complex. It's not just about the interaction between factors of identity such as gender or race and its contribution to social inequality, but also the intricacies that exist within individual factors of identity (Crenshaw 2013). Take race, the advantage of an intercultural world along with the expansion of global technology means that ethnicity is not confined or easily identifiable leaving the construction of identity to the self.

As a result of the Pearling influence in the Northwest of Western Australia I have the privilege of belonging to many racial identities including Malay, Islander, Scottish and Indigenous heritage. Culturally within my family and community I strongly identify with my Malay and Indigenous heritage. I am the youngest child of thirteen siblings which means that essentially everyone else is my senior and out of respect for that seniority my role is to do what I am told. It's important to note that this is not a question of power imbalance or inequality; it is simply my role within my own family and community.

There is a long-standing relationship between communication, media, and discourses of identity. Theorists argue that communication and media are responsible for shaping narratives around identity, meaning that membership to a social identity comes with a predetermined status or position in society based on public perception (Sanders and Banjo 2013). The political and poor social standing of Indigenous people in Australia is etched into our social fabric and negative stereotypes are largely reinforced by the lack of informed coverage in the media (Korff 2022). Sanders and Banjo (2013) argue that the media provides an opportunity to discuss matters of intersectionality as the social status or class of a group's identity in society is made clear in the way they are reflected in the mass media.

In the workplace my mixed physical features allow me to pick and choose my identity which based on the audience's perception can either authenticate or invalidate my belonging to that identity. Georgiou (2013) states that the media "manage spaces of belonging within and across physical boundaries". I have at times hid my Indigenous identity at the sacrifice of belonging for fear of the negative perceptions often held about Indigenous Australians.

The negative framing has also infiltrated government policy and agenda leading to deficit-based programs such as income management which see many Indigenous people as the recipients and targets of injustice with little input from themselves focused on addressing disadvantage (Maddison, 2012). Indigenous people sit on the periphery with the current social structures excluding them from participating and seeing even less positive representation of themselves more broadly (Ní Bhroin et al. 2021). Ní Bhroin and co-authors (2021) advocate for the media as vehicle for increasing Indigenous political participation with a caveat that it also has the ability to reinforce existing power structures.

On the chance that I reveal my Indigenous identity I am often labeled as the exception to the rule,

immediately removing my membership from my identity. Should my membership be validated and accepted then often I am referred to as the poster child for that chosen identity meaning that I am used as an example of and can speak for that identity group. This is in direct conflict to my role within my family and community and leads to challenges about representation and belonging. This is also followed up with the assumption that any personal or professional achievement could have only been possible due to some kind of positive discrimination to fill quotas or as a result of receiving financial benefit.

So, before I walk in the door of my workplace, I need to decide whether I will sacrifice my belonging by both exposing or hiding my identity or whether to act in the interest of self-preservation. This suggests that there is choice about adopting a social identity. In reality, there is no separation of culture and your identity, denial would see you be labeled as the other. This is supported by evidence that states that your identity is so intrinsically linked with social and emotional wellbeing with no separation from family and community for Indigenous Australians that any disruption would be detrimental (Dudgeoun et al. 2017).

This assault on your identity is not limited to those outside your membership group. The concept of **lateral violence** is a familiar term within colonised groups of people. Stemming from oppression the negative views reinforced from the oppressor became internalised over generations leading to a negative view of self and others resulting in violence directed at each other (Whyman et al. 2022). This violence is frequently presented by the questioning of one's identity or authenticity to the membership group. In the workplace this can be manifested by singling out individuals and making them feel psychologically unsafe through the use of derogatory or negative language. It can also look like ignoring the existence of someone's membership to an identity group.

This lateral violence is not confined to the workplace. My standing in my family and community means that it is not my place to talk on behalf of or about potentially contentious issues. Any behaviour that is seen to disrupt the balance of harmony leads to shaming or threats to your membership by using terms like coconut meaning you are black on the outside and white on the inside. This implies that you are trying to be like the coloniser. Behaviour that can lead to shaming or questioning of identity can be anything from receiving an accolade to wanting to engage with education. As a person who has sought out opportunities for education, I have been called a coconut many times or implied that I think I am better than others because I have received a Western education. My own personal challenge in this is being able to engage in work that excites me whilst working hard to maintain my family and community connections. I have seen many others in my position disengage from the workplace for fear of losing their connection to their identity. This demonstrates some of the complexities within just one factor of identity and its impact in the workplace without touching on the intersecting challenges that my age or gender bring to a male dominated industry.

This is the challenge that intersectionality brings. It's not enough to say that we support intersectionality because as a bystander we understand the intersection of race and gender can lead to social inequality. We need to actively work to break down systems and structures that create non diverse workplaces and institutions that allow inequality to occur.

About the author

Sha Fallon is a Masters of Communication student from Western Australia, who holds a degree in Social Sciences. Sha walks in two worlds thanks to the diverse pearling influence of the North West. This influence has motivated Sha to spend much of her career working in grassroots community development programs in regional and remote areas of WA. Sha is passionate about starting where people are and working to build their capacity as she believes that leads to long term sustainable development for individuals and communities.

Ahead in Chapter 6...

Chapter 6 wrap-up

CHAPTER 6 WRAP-UP

You have now finished Chapter 6.

In this chapter, we've explored the relationship between communication and identity, and considered how fandom, media consumption, digital practices, active curation, and intersectionality can impact how we *identify ourselves* and are *identified by others*.

Things to think about...

Write a story about your relationship with a cultural product – it can be a brand, celebrity, news outlet, television show, film, video game, or social media platform. Look back over what you've written: what aspects of your identity can you discern? How would you describe those identity aspects – authentic elements of your self; performances; constructions; or a mix?

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PART VII

CHAPTER 7: EFFECTS

THE EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION

Have you ever tried to limit the amount of time you spend on your phone because of concerns about its effect on you?

Have you ever reduced your news consumption because you're sick of the negative effects of news on your mood?

Have you ever put a trigger warning on a piece of content you've created, in an effort to reduce the potential harmful effect on particular audiences?

Have you ever worried about the effect of excessive screen time on your children – or have you found that, as a young person, your own screen time is policed, controlled, or made an object of concern by others?

If so, you've thought about the effects of communication, on yourself or on other people.

There is a very long history behind these ideas. The question of "effects" has haunted communication studies and driven much of its pioneering work. Longstanding and persistent debates about the existence, nature, and severity of such effects have led to advances in communication theory but they have also surfaced again and again in response to shifts in the technological landscape.

Strangely, media effects has become an avoided topic in university courses that teach students how to become skilled communicators. Nevertheless, the effects of communication on individuals and on society are fundamentally related to both theory and professional practice.

When we communicate, we are often intending to have an effect. Professional communicators who work in advertising, public relations, graphic design, journalism, or any number of crisis communication, risk communication, activist or advocacy roles, are *always* designing content with a desired effect in mind: they are trying to provide information, attract attention, entertain or persuade target audiences. Even if you're having a conversation, the intended effect of your communicational efforts may be persuasion, self-promotion, the expression of support or kindness – or perhaps you just want the other person to understand you, which is an effect in itself.

Effect is absolutely at the core of what communicators *do*.

And as we have seen in previous chapters, the relationship between communication and society involves complex effects. Communicators can act as change agents – they can raise awareness of social issues and provide context for understanding them. Communication is linked to how power is distributed in society and how it is struggled over.

But are the effects of media and communication something we should worry about?

Or, more precisely, how do we confront and work with the effects of communication in a digitised world, in a way that does not sideline particular practices – or particular people?



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

Media effects is a communication concept that refers to the real, predicted, or imagined effect of mediated communication on audiences. It is both a research tradition with a long and complicated history, and a way of thinking about communication that often frames public debates about media consumption and regulation. No doubt you're familiar with some of these debates, which manifest in questions like these:

- Do social media influencers perpetuate harmful ideas about beauty standards?
- Are the screens in our lives making us more distracted?
- Is excessive screen time bad for children?
- Are video games addictive?
- Does the use of digital tools like Google or ChatGPT erode our capacity to think critically and creatively?

You'll notice that these are not easy questions to answer. Indeed, the best way to approach them is to *resist* the compulsion to apply an easy answer. To fully participate in these debates, we need to understand their origins.

This chapter will explore the effects of communication. Its launching place will be the effects tradition of media research, but we will move from there into an examination of the effects of communication on society and everyday life.

In this chapter...

Engaging with “media effects”

The effects of social media

Agenda setting and the spiral of silence

Case study – how online dating apps have influenced gender norms

Media effects, use, and agency

Chapter 7 wrap-up

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ENGAGING WITH "MEDIA EFFECTS"

The term "media effects" refers to a constellation of theories concerned with the media's influence on people's behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes. The **effects tradition** of audience research is at least a century old, which is in itself remarkable: researchers have been exploring and debating the effects of communication for over a hundred years. Students who come to communication studies wanting to write about the harmful effects of video games, the impact of TikTok or Instagram on mental health, or the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in advertising – or similar – are sometimes unaware that they're stepping into a research tradition with such a long history.

And this history involves powerful dissent from key thinkers, as we'll see in a moment. "Media effects" may be a communication concept, but we don't have to agree with it: indeed, there are many reasons why we shouldn't.

Running parallel to this century of research, public anxieties about media effects have been projected onto emergent media products and practices. When the communication landscape changes, people are naturally curious about the consequences of new ways of communicating, and often, this leads to a build-up of fear and worry.

At times, public anxiety and research coalesced. In the 1920s, for example, research funded by the Payne Fund in the United States investigated the effects of movie-watching on children. At the time, movies were a new form of communication and extraordinarily popular with kids. The research was informed by concerns about the erosion of moral standards and worries about the unknown impacts of this spectacularly new technology.

Waves of later research would elaborate on this early work.

For example, the **mean world syndrome** was a theory proposed by communication scholar George Gerbner as part of his work on cultivation analysis in the 1970s. Gerbner was interested in the build-up of pessimistic ideas through long-term media consumption. He argued that people can develop heightened anxiety, and a heightened sense of risk and vulnerability, due to the amount of crime or violence depicted in the media. In other words, someone who watches or reads a lot of media will think the world is a scarier place – or so the theory goes.

Meanwhile, psychologist Albert Bandura's work on **social learning theory** – also in the 1970s – cast media effects in a new light of relevance by suggesting that individual behaviour is influenced by what we observe in others, including those we see on screen.

As these examples suggest, the idea of "media effects" usually implies *negative* effects. While positive effects are themselves interesting and worthy of attention, the effects tradition has been mostly concerned with risk, vulnerability, and harm.

Generally, this sort of research also focuses on (and tries to find evidence of) *changes* that occur in audiences following exposure to a message. This may be a change in attitude or a change in behaviour, or both, but it does not usually include fleeting reactions such as a shift in mood.

For example, if I'm an avid watcher of a television crime drama, it may be that I experience a range of emotional responses while viewing each episode. Perhaps I experience suspense or feel on the edge of my seat, eager to know what happens next. Perhaps I feel frustrated with particular plot developments or experience grief if my favourite character falls victim to a horrible crime. Media effects researchers wouldn't be too interested in these sorts of reactions. Instead, they might wonder whether I felt scared in real, public places as a result of this viewing experience, or whether I started to believe that violent crimes were more likely to occur than was statistically probable in my local area. And they would certainly be very interested if I committed a violent crime myself after watching the program.

In fact, media depictions of violent crime are often debated, scrutinised, and policed – and even outrightly blamed – when high-profile crimes are committed. Only a few years ago, in the wake of the tragic 2018 shooting at a school in Parkland, Florida, the governor of Kentucky Matt Bevin claimed that video games like *Grand Theft Auto* are dangerous and culpable because they celebrate a "culture of death" (as reported in this article from The Verge). Here, the idea of media effects is politicised, even weaponised.

Most communication and media scholars today are suspicious or openly critical of the idea of media effects, arguing that it "tackles social problems backwards" (Gauntlett 2005), fails to hold up in an era defined by media fragmentation (Bennett and Iyengar 2008), and underestimates the degree to which audiences – including very young audiences – actively decode media meanings (Jenkins 2015: 106).

What many of these scholars agree on is this: concerns about media effects are usually articulations of deeper cultural anxieties. For example, concerns over depictions of gun violence in the media are informed by deeper anxieties about gun control or social disorder; concerns over "screen time" for children are informed by deeper anxieties about the changing nature of childhood.



Photo by Ron Lach from Pexels

On the one hand, then, we have fierce arguments from thought leaders and communication scholars debunking the media effects model, and this has led to real progress in communication studies. In particular, it has encouraged more research into the practices, perceptions, and everyday lives of audiences themselves.

On the other hand, these concerns haven't gone away. Far from it – they resurface and collect around the emergence of new media. And in some cases, "media effects" is a very real problem that is lived, felt, experienced, and grappled with by individuals on a daily basis.

We'll take up these ideas in the next section.

Ahead in Chapter 7...

The effects of social media

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Now that we've identified some of the problems with the concept of "media effects", let's put our ideas to the test and consider the effects of *social* media.

This is a newsworthy topic. Indeed, since the emergence of social media in the mid-2000s, legacy media like news have spent a considerable amount of time telling us how harmful these new platforms are.

And it's not just news. You've probably heard or even participated in conversations about the negative effects of social media: you've heard people say that these platforms are addictive, they impact your sleep, they impact your attention and make it hard to concentrate, they lead to polarisation, division, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

Somewhat ironically, maybe these conversations have themselves unfolded on social media platforms.

So, how valid are these concerns? And how do we, as communication scholars, navigate this thorny territory?

First of all, it's problematic to *assume* that social media has a negative effect on users. And we certainly shouldn't make any such claims without evidence.

Nevertheless, the effects of social media are of great interest to researchers – and they may also be of great interest to you, personally, if you've experienced problems such as cyberbullying, online harassment, or digital addiction. Such problems are both **moral panics** – mythical evils evoked in cultural discourse (Cohen 2011) – and real issues that people grapple with as part of their everyday lives. Like most moral panics, they are communicated and amplified through the mainstream media. Like most "real issues", they are individualised, lived, and deeply personal.

Today, researchers continue to investigate the impacts of social and digital media in a way that exposes very real problems. For instance, a 2021 research brief prepared by the Centre for Digital Wellbeing in Australia contends that social media has a negative impact on mental health, especially for young people, and is linked to technology-facilitated abuse including gender-based violence, online harassment, and stalking.

It was also in 2021 that internal research by parent company Facebook (now Meta) found that Instagram worsened body image problems for one in three girls, because the algorithms used by the app created a vortex of damaging content with very real effects on girls' self esteem. This research received mainstream media attention when it was leaked to the Wall Street Journal, leading to a protracted public discussion about whether social media companies have a duty to protect users from harm.

Once again, you'll notice the emphasis here is on *negative* effects. Historically, there has been comparatively little attention paid to the positive effects of media and communication. Yet research today shows that social media can lead to increased feelings of social connectedness, as well as strengthening civic engagement and political participation (Centre for Digital Wellbeing 2021: 24). A strong body positivity movement has emerged through social media activity promoting healthier ways of thinking about one's physical self. Digital media is used as a tool by communicators with social justice agendas, and once-

maligned pastimes like playing online games have been shown to improve memory, creative thinking, and problem-solving.

Still, stories about the negative impacts of media tend to linger for longer in the public's memory, and are a greater object of cultural fascination (and cultural anxiety). For those with direct experience, the negative impacts of media can be destructive, all-consuming, and unavoidable, whereas we perhaps don't take as much notice when social media helps us connect with a community or allows us to share a positive message.

Many of the negative effects of social media were catalogued in the 2020 film *The Social Dilemma*, a documentary directed by American filmmaker Jeff Orlowski. The film details the techniques used by tech giants to ensnare users, with resounding themes of addiction, enslavement, power, and abuse.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://deakin.pressbooks.pub/communicationconcepts/?p=161#oembed-1

The Social Dilemma | Official Trailer | Netflix

Things to think about...

Watch the trailer for *The Social Dilemma*, above.

1. How many examples of "media effects" can you identify? List as many as possible.
2. Do you think the film makes social media the object of a moral panic? Or does it expose fundamental and deeply impactful problems with our digital media landscape?

Interestingly, the media release circulated by Facebook in response to *The Social Dilemma* uses a language that harkens back to academic criticisms of the media effects model. "Rather than offer a nuanced look at technology", Facebook complained, "[the film] gives a distorted view of how social media platforms work to create a convenient scapegoat for what are difficult and complex societal problems". In other words, to use David Gauntlett's phrase, *The Social Dilemma* may well be guilty of "tackl[ing] social problems backwards".

And, of course, *The Social Dilemma* is a documentary that *itself* is designed to have an effect. Like many

documentary filmmakers, Orlowski (who also directed the climate-themed documentaries *Chasing Coral* and *Chasing Ice*) wants viewers to become more aware of a particular social problem as a result of having watched his film. According to researchers at the University of Annenberg's Media Impact Project, *The Social Dilemma* did indeed have a positive effect by improving viewers' knowledge of the persuasive design techniques employed by social media companies, thereby activating a healthy suspicion of social media products (Rosenthal et al. 2022).

What can we conclude here?

That it's complicated.

To summarise: the question of whether media has an effect on audiences is a longstanding one that needs to be located within the context of the effects tradition of media research – and the debates it has sparked. We shouldn't accept effects-based theories without question – but we should acknowledge their continuing power in public discourse. And we always, always need to ask – we need to *never stop* asking – what assumptions lie within such theories?

Now reflect again, as you did at the start of this chapter, on your relationship with a media object like your phone. Can you look at this relationship through a media effects lens? When you apply this mode of thinking, do new dimensions of your identity as a phone user emerge? Are there problems with this way of thinking? What assumptions might somebody else make about your relationship with your phone – and what arguments could you construct in the face of these assumptions?

Ahead in Chapter 7...

Agenda setting and the spiral of silence

AGENDA SETTING AND THE SPIRAL OF SILENCE

What we've explored so far are the potential effects of communication and media on *individuals* – both the real manifestations of such effects and the ways in which society imagines, projects, and worries about them.

But you'll also notice that such investigations throw up interesting questions about the effects of communication on *society* itself.

For example, we might describe **polarisation** as an effect of communication, especially digital and networked modes of communication. Polarisation involves the division of audiences or publics into two sharply contrasting groups that are mistrustful of each other. In a polarised society, we might be less inclined to listen to others whose ideas don't confirm our own worldviews. Arguably, the rise of social media has deeply contributed to the polarisation of societies in the 21st century.



Image by Iván Tamás from Pixabay. Polarisation can be described as an effect of communication on society.

Communicators can also have an effect on society if they strategically and deliberately put an issue "on the agenda", or "set the agenda" for public conversation. By focusing on some issues rather than others,

communicators influence what is considered important – and what, or who, is silenced. According to the communication theorists McCombs and Shaw (1972), this is **agenda setting**.

Try this. Make a list of five issues that you think are most important, globally, at the moment. Now look at your list and ask yourself: where did I get these ideas from? Where and how did I come to believe that these issues are of global importance, at the expense of others?

It's likely that there are many answers to those questions. You may consider issues that have impacted you personally, or impacted your home country, to be more significant than issues from which you are distanced. But it may also be that you think of these issues as important because you often read about them in the news, see them represented in film or television, hear them discussed in podcasts, or see them depicted online. The latter is an example of agenda setting.

This also means that communication leads to the creation and cultivation of *silences*.

An interesting variation on this idea is **the spiral of silence,** a theory conceptualised in the 1970s by German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, who is described by British newspaper The Independent as a "pioneer of public opinion research". According to Noelle-Neumann, we're more likely to speak out if we feel our opinion is supported by others. For this reason, the seeming dominance of an opinion leads to the creation of silences because dissenters are less likely to voice their perspectives. Noelle-Neumann named this communicational phenomenon "the spiral of silence".

Consider how this manifests as both an operation and an effect of mediated communication in a digital world. Noelle-Neumann was wonderfully prescient. Silence can grow if topics and perspectives are not represented, and such silence spirals into *more* silence. As Tsfati et al explain:

> The media effects component of spiral-of-silence argues that, notwithstanding the influence of our interpersonal environment, media regularly and strongly impact our perceptions regarding what other people are thinking. (2014: 4)

In other words, the media seemingly tell us what other people think and this influences our own likelihood or willingness to speak out about certain topics, share certain opinions, or engage in public conversations. Even though much has changed since Noelle-Neumann developed the spiral of silence theory – at the core of which was a broadcast model of communication and a perception of the media as "mass" rather than fragmented – we can detect manifestations of her ideas today. Tsfati et al, for example, found that audiences exposed to right-wing media tended to believe that public opinion was "tilted toward" the right (2014); this is, of course, another way of describing how societies come to be polarised.

Some of the best work I've seen by Master of Communication students takes silence as its starting point. For the communication researcher, silences are deeply interesting. We need to ask: what are the things nobody is talking about, and why is this the case?

Ahead in Chapter 7...

Case study – how online dating apps have influenced gender norms

HOW ONLINE DATING APPS HAVE INFLUENCED GENDER NORMS

Ruth Stephanie A. Akolo

The invention of online matchmaking was a major turning point in the dating landscape and created a noticeable shift in the traditional dating script. Over the past decade, online dating has risen in popularity and advanced in both organization and structure. Women-centered mobile applications, most notably, Bumble, appeal widely to a largely female audience. This niche mobile dating app has digitally transformed the traditional dating script by centring women's needs with the hopes of balancing the scales of equality in a male-dominated industry. As a result, it has influenced gender identity and social behavioral changes among heterosexual men and women on the online dating platform.

But how does online dating, as a type of digital communication, influence society? And which communication concepts can help us explore this effect?

Online dating is the practice of using the internet to search for, interact, and meet up with potential romantic or sexual partners. This social networking is facilitated mainly through a dedicated website or application. Also known as virtual dating, this now popular social practice, first broke out to the public population in the mid-1990s with the launch of Match.com in 1995 (Fansher and Eckinger 2020). Soon after its premiere, other major competitors such as eHarmony launched in 2000, followed by PlentyOfFish in 2003 and OkCupid debuted in 2004.

According to the Pew Research Centre, online dating as a type of digital communication can have notable effects on individuals and on society. It can lead to online harassment, particularly of young women, and it can disrupt traditional ideas about meeting romantic partners – for better or for worse.

The founder of Bumble, Whitney Wolfe, seems cognisant of these effects and sought to mitigate them. Like Tinder, Bumble adopted the now-familiar swiping feature but with a matriarchal twist: a man can't message a woman unless she initiates contact first. Once a match is made, the woman is given a 24-hour window to 'make the first move,' and once this time elapses the match disappears.

With its female-led initiative, Bumble singlehandedly flipped the dating script and changed the narrative for heterosexual online dating – thus potentially changing the effects of online dating on women and on society. In particular, Bumble sought to redefine gender norms by leveling a male-dominated industry by positioning women as the directors of their own love story.

The theory of agenda setting provides a useful account of the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda (Miller 2005). To set the agenda means to put an issue on the table for public discussion. Bumble achieved this with its female-first transformations to online dating. In doing so, it put the idea of female-led dating on the agenda.

We can also describe framing as a type of communicational effect on society. Bumble reframed online dating (and romance in general) by focusing on women as leaders in the relationship.

It's clear that Bumble's initiative was influenced by the ideologies and experiences of its founder. During her tenure at Tinder, working as the marketing executive, Wolfe experienced sexual harassment and discrimination at the workplace. This resulted in her filing a lawsuit against the dating app giant in 2014. Wolfe is now dedicated to empowering women and advocating for gender equality on a global level by using Bumble as a platform to create that space for its female users. She continues to influence interpretive frameworks about mobile-based dating apps and feminism.

This case study shows that media effects is a complicated concept. Online dating apps are often the target of negative news coverage that focuses on the disruption to "traditional" types of romance. There is little media coverage of online dating as an enabler of relationships. Bumble shows that the rules around online dating can be rewritten to enable women's participation in digitally-enhanced relationships and to paint a different picture of acceptable behaviours in a romantic partnership.

In conclusion, communication shapes meaning through various aspects of our lives, and this can directly and indirectly affect our worldviews, beliefs, ideologies, and perceptions of what we think we know. There is a plethora of facilitators and contributors to the communication process that help further in the meaning-making process of things. Digital media has changed the game by diversifying the kind of information that is out there in the world. There truly is something out there for everyone to familiarize themselves with. Through communication and media, we are able to position ourselves somewhere in society and navigate through this digital age. Newspapers, television, and radio continue to hold influential power in forming public opinion whereas social media platforms such as Bumble, Instagram, and TikTok which are user-centered, continue to take over the public sphere.

About the author

Ruth Stephanie A. Akolo was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya and currently resides in Australia. Ruth is a Masters student pursuing her degree in Communication and Public Relations. She strongly believes in the power of passion when adopted into little aspects of our daily lives to achieve sustainable and long-term goals. Ruth began her journey in the Communication field over three years ago. One of her greatest achievements has been contributing as the lead copywriter for Westminster Foundation for Democracy (Kenya) to help launch their first official e-newsletter.

Ahead in Chapter 7...

Media effects, use, and agency

MEDIA EFFECTS, USE, AND AGENCY

This chapter has explored media effects, a topic with a very long history that continues to surface in conversations about communication today – the public conversations that play out in news media and in political discourse, as well as the more informal conversations that swirl around us, including those I've had with students in communication studies classrooms – many of whom are deeply concerned, interested, and invested in the effects of media in a fast-paced digital world.

Such conversations continue to throw up questions that are fascinating because they are so difficult to answer. Will generative AI have a damaging, lasting effect on our ability to communicate and produce creative works? Can communication change people's minds about climate change? And what about the effect of communication systems and products on the natural world itself?

Media effects plays an important role in my own research on children and environmental communication. Children have always been at the centre of media effects-based research: adults have long been asking (and imagining, and worrying) about the effects of mediated communication on young people, and much scholarly work on children and young people in recent decades has worked to unpick the deeply established ideas that position children as innocent, incompetent non-adults who are vulnerable to, and must therefore be protected from, the encroach of (digital) media technology.

Whether we're talking about children or adults, it's important to note that "effects" is only *one* approach through which we might understand the relationship between communication, society, and everyday life.

So what are the alternatives?

We've already explored some of them. Meaning was our focus in Chapter 5, and as Henry Jenkins has insisted (2006), a focus on meaning and interpretation is an approach that opens up the avenues of inquiry and discovery that are often closed by debates about the media's effects. And if you reflected on your own identity in Chapter 6, you would likely have found that your relationship with digital media and networked communication is too complex and multifaceted to be contained within the idea of "effects", even if you agree that you are effected by communication in some way.

Closely related to both meaning and identity is the notion of **media use**.

In the 1960s, communication scholar Elihu Katz proposed a theory of **uses and gratifications** that is widely considered to be an antithesis to the notion of media effects. Katz believed media use was an active choice – and he wanted to work out *how* audiences use media, rather than whether they were effected by it. This is sometimes described as a shift in emphasis from '**what the media does to us**' to '**what we do with the media**'.

Katz was particularly interested in broadcast communication, namely radio and television, but we can funnel his ideas into our own time and our own reflections on our digital selves. For example, when thinking about our relationships with our phones, rather than asking how our phones *effect* us, we can ask – what *benefits* and *uses* does our phone provide or fulfill? These benefits and uses might include

escapism, diversion, connection, information, participation, activism, and/or the formation of aspects of our identity.

Scholars writing about the uses of social and digital media often deploy the term **affordances** to describe the relationship between a media platform, its properties, and its users. Affordances are the qualities or attributes of an object that define the ways it can be used.

In her work on teenagers and their digital practices in the emergent days of social media, danah boyd outlines the complicated relationship between media effects, media use, the affordances of digital tools and platforms, and the agency of media users, particularly in the context of networked publics. Boyd observes that digital technologies of networked communication have shifted social norms about privacy and sharing (2014: 63): a clear "effect" of digital media on society and on individual lives. However, she also reveals that young people often develop their own ways of operating within a system that is designed to restrict their privacy and profit from their sharing. She explains:

> "Rather than eschewing privacy when they encounter public spaces, many teens are looking for new ways to achieve privacy within networked publics. As such, when teens develop innovative strategies to achieve privacy, they often reclaim power by doing so. Privacy doesn't just depend on agency; being able to achieve privacy is an expression of agency." (boyd 2014: 76)

By **agency**, she means the capacity to act with power and intention. Notice how boyd's research, which focuses on the practices and perceptions of young social media users, actively disrupts media effects paradigms by foregrounding the power (or potential power) of a social group typically perceived to be both vulnerable and problematic in relation to their media use.

Ahead in Chapter 7...

Chapter 7 wrap-up

CHAPTER 7 WRAP-UP

You have now finished Chapter 7.

This chapter has shown that the effects of communication should not be dismissed. To dismiss them is to ignore that they can be real – indeed, they can be *lived*; to dismiss them is also to dangerously neglect the power they have in their *imagined* form, and the powerful role they continue to play in public discourse about communication and its relationship with social problems.

Moreover, as communication becomes more participatory, the effects of media become everybody's problem and everybody's responsibility. Find out more about this in the next chapter, when we discuss **participatory culture**.

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PART VIII

CHAPTER 8: PARTICIPATION

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

This book has been grounded in the idea of communication as the sharing of meaning. The communication concepts we've explored in the previous chapters allow us to understand the mechanisms and practices through which meaning is shared, and the impacts and consequences of meaning-making on our identities, our cultures, our ideologies, our world.

But what powers do we as citizens have to get involved in this sharing process? To what extent can we shape the flow of meaning? And what tools and competencies enable us to participate in the production of knowledge and culture?

We're going to finish this book by exploring the ways in which communication has shaped – and been shaped by – the rise of **participatory culture**.

Communication has always been participatory, to a certain extent. Interpersonal conversations tend to involve participants, not "senders" and "receivers". Even in a broadcast model of communication, audiences participate in the production of meaning because they interpret and actively use messages, rather than simply receiving them.

But today it's acknowledged that we live in a "participatory culture" where audiences and citizens have more access to cultural production processes than ever before. Mediated communication has become a lot more like a conversation, even as many of our conversations have become mediatised. And indeed, some of the most important conversations swirling through the public sphere today are led by citizens and grassroots movements rather than professional communicators or elite social actors.

An important way to think of participatory culture is to contrast it with *consumer* culture. In a participatory culture, we do more than consume the products of communication.

How many words can you use to describe the way you interact with communication and media content? Try to think of verbs: words that describe what you *do* as an audience, a receiver, or a media user. You will probably find you have a host of creative responses to this question. Maybe you binge, scroll, follow. You listen, watch, read. Maybe you also blog, share, remix, post, play, write, remake, lead. Your audience practices are not limited to consumption, and often, you will actively participate in the production and sharing of meaning.



Image: Word Cloud created by Master of Communication students describing themselves as "audiences". Generated through Mentimeter. How many of these words indicate active participation?

What is "participatory culture"?

In a landmark report for the MacArthur Foundation, cultural theorist Henry Jenkins established a widely used definition of participatory culture that encompasses the following:

> - Low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
> - A strong support for creating and sharing one's creations
> - Mentorship, where what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
> - A sense of social connection and a belief that our contributions matter.
>
> (Jenkins et al. 2009: 3)

In combination, these elements of communication and culture in the 21st century allow citizens to be participants as well as spectators.

There are many ways of describing our communication landscape today: networked; mediatised; algorithmic. I like "participatory" because it places emphasis on the culture rather than the technology. Certainly, though, the development of participatory culture has been aided and facilitated by technological change. Today we have the opportunity to join online communities, create and share content, and shape the flow of media and communication in a way that we did not in decades past. As Jenkins and co-authors explain,

> "Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (2009: 8).

For this reason, as technology changes and develops, the nature of our participation also changes – not because one drives the other, but because the two are intertwined.

For example, one of the findings of the 2023 Digital News Report – a global study of audiences' engagement with news – was that open modes of participation, such as sharing and commenting on news stories, had declined in favour of participation on closed networks such as WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram, and Discord (Park et al. 2023: 16). In other words, news audiences seem to be gravitating towards means of participation that are more private, more trusted, and less toxic – and this shift is inextricably linked to the emergence of such newer, private or semi-private platforms.

But it's important not to confuse participatory *culture* with participatory *technology*. Jenkins et al make an important distinction here between interactivity as a property of the technology and participation as a property of the culture (2009: 8).

Let's consider social movement activism. For centuries, humans have been agitating in impactful ways, leading to social change. Today, digital tools facilitate activism, making it easier for messages to be shared and groups to be organised. Facebook, Instagram, Discord, and countless other social media services amplify voices and connect likeminded individuals. Augmented reality can literally enable activists to help others see the world in new ways. There are more opportunities for involvement in social movement activism than ever before, so much so that 2019 was dubbed by news outlets "the year of the protest" (see this article in the Washington Post).



Image by Flore W from Pixabay

But activism, even today, is not a solely technological practice. There are discursive and creative aspects to activism – from the colourful branding of movements like Extinction Rebellion to the careful crafting of messages by the young members of Fridays for Future. Many of the means by which activists express divergent ideas are decidedly analogue: sit-ins, walk-outs, takeovers, even "craftivism". And running deeply through these varied creative offline and online practices is a culture that supports, enables, and embraces participation, in which members give their skills, time, and effort in return for a sense of belonging and agency that contributes to their identity.

So it is not technology alone that makes communication more participatory. Perhaps it's more apt to say that the technological and digital tools with which we interact are part of the bedrock of participatory culture (but not its sole defining feature). And our interactions with digital technologies are a fascinating and ever-changing aspect of the way "participatory culture" as a communication concept is itself taking on new forms and new meaning. For example, in a 2018 article for the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*, Nicolle Lamerichs predicts that with the mainstreaming of generative AI "we will share participatory culture with nonhuman entities" and "a new form of participation will emerge that involves nonhumans as important actors".

This chapter will introduce you to participatory culture. We'll explore the various, evolving forms of participation, and consider the relevance of this concept today. From memes and fan practices to misinformation and echo chambers, we'll consider the challenges and opportunities associated with participatory culture and, fittingly, we'll end with a reflection on the participatory aspects of open educational resources.

In this chapter...

Witches, memes, and Spider-Man – traversing the participatory culture landscape

Case study – Participatory culture, Doctor Who, and 'My Doctor' identity

Problems with participatory culture

Media and digital literacies

Chapter 8 wrap-up and a conclusion of sorts

To continue reading Chapter 8, click "Next" in the bottom right corner or **follow this link**.

WITCHES, MEMES, AND SPIDER-MAN – TRAVERSING THE PARTICIPATORY CULTURE LANDSCAPE

A participatory culture is one in which content *spreads.* As we saw in the previous section, this spread of content is facilitated by digital networks and by a propensity for peer-to-peer sharing.

Perhaps the perfect object of participatory culture is the meme. There are certainly low barriers to entry when it comes to making a meme, the production of which often relies on popular culture knowledge and communication skill rather than technological prowess: the key to a meme's effectiveness is often the timing of its use, much like a well-timed one-liner in a conversation. Internet memes typically take the form of an image with a short caption, and design tools like Canva provide meme generators that require little more than a drag-and-drop action. The results can be impactful. Often humorous, Internet memes are not necessarily trivial – they can be used as discursive devices in public conversations about serious global issues (climate change, racial justice, gender equality, political reform) and they can also express deep and complex personal emotions (nostalgia, jealousy, empowerment).

What is a meme?

A "meme" is a unit of cultural information, and the term predates digital culture, coined as it was by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976. Dawkins was interested in the way cultural information spreads from person to person, self-replicating in a similar manner to genes. Reinsborough and Canning remind us that a "meme" is really "any unit of culture that has spread beyond its creator—buzz words, catchy melodies, fashion trends, ideas, rituals, images, and the like" (2010: 34).

For an example of a centuries-old meme, take this image:



Image by StarGladeVintage from Pixabay

You likely recognise this person as a witch. Our minds very quickly break this image down into recognisable "signs" (see Chapter 4) – the pointed hat; the flying broomstick; the black cat; the age of the woman; her pointed nose, long skirt, and boots. Our cultural training helps us read this combination of signs. We've probably encountered similar images in childhood storybooks and in a plethora of popular media, where the signs are reproduced to the point of deep familiarity.

Why is this a meme? Because it can be described as a cultural idea, a unit of meaning, that spread until it was accepted as "true".

The semiotic patterns that define "a witch" were derived from Christian discourse and established in the 14th and 15th centuries, when large numbers of people, mostly women, were persecuted by religious and political elites. These representational patterns were thus deeply entrenched in a politics of control by (male) authority figures over female embodiment and identity – and they were dispersed through printed media, aided by a new technology: the printing press. With the affordances of this new medium, pamphlets and broadsides were printed and distributed to the public, allowing information to be widely shared like never before. Often, these printed texts were image-heavy (since a large portion of their readership was illiterate) and relied for their storytelling power upon woodcuts: designs cut into blocks of wood, used to form illustrations in printed books. And so the iconography of the "wicked witch" was established.

This original witch meme circulated widely, but everyday folk (including, and especially, the women who it depicted) had no access to the means of cultural production through which such ideas gained

power and prominence. Today, it's a different story. Online we can create our own memes about witches using bits and pieces of culture, featuring characters from The Wizard of Oz, Harry Potter, or Minecraft, expressing an endless range of ideas about work, relationships, politics, and global events. Members of modern witchcraft communities and/or people who identify as witches can remake the signs of culture (including these long-ago ideas about pointy-hatted women on broomsticks) to express aspects of their relationship with a belief system. And yes, the meme of "wicked witch" can still be deployed in a harmful way, often to express misogynistic ideas (see Chapter 1 and the section on Julia Gillard's misogyny speech for an example of this).

Memes are, of course, storytelling devices too. As Reinsborough and Canning point out, a meme is "a capsule for a story to spread" (2010: 34). Using the example of social movements, they explain that such movements contain common stories through which people can "express their shared values and act with a common vision". These stories, they continue, are "encapsulated into memes—slogans, symbols, and rituals— that can spread throughout culture" (2010: 34).

For example, the iconic raised fist is a signifier of the Black Lives Matter movement but can also be described as a meme that encapsulates the stories the movement wants to tell about justice and the reclaiming of power. Like an Internet meme, the raised fist is identifiable, easy to replicate and share, and impactful because of the meanings it carries. Meanwhile, the movement's website makes available a variety of tools to support and enable participation in the sharing of its messages, including social media templates and toolkits for activists.



Image by Ivan Radic, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Disrupting the top-down process of communication

What we're starting to see here is that practices of meaning-sharing and meaning-making can be more or less open to participation; they can be top-down practices controlled by elite social actors, or they can be grassroots practices led by audiences and citizens. Indeed, they can be a fabulous, messy mix of the two, because we can use the products of popular culture as raw material (Fiske 1990) when sending our own messages and telling our own stories.

Such was the case for Preston Mutanga, a 14 year old Canadian fan of LEGO and animation who had for years been creating his own animated LEGO videos and posting them to his YouTube channel. In 2023, Mutanga caught the attention of Hollywood producers Chris Miller and Phil Lord when he created a LEGO version of the trailer for the movie *Spider-Man: Across the Spiderverse*. Mutanga was a self-taught animator who used the tools at his disposal: the free, open-source software Blender and the audience of followers he had cultivated on YouTube. His video impressed Miller and Lord, *Across the Spiderverse*'s producers, and Mutanga was subsequently invited to create a sequence that appeared in this commercially successful Hollywood production.

Is this an example of participatory culture at work?

Arguably, it is. The film industry has traditionally had very high barriers to entry – one must train for years and slowly work their way through the industry ranks before having access to the equipment, funding, and production and distribution networks required for making a film. However, there are *lower* barriers to artistic expression on YouTube, which since its inception in 2005 has allowed amateur and professional filmmakers alike to bypass industry gatekeepers and distribute their own video content. A culture that supports amateur creative endeavours and the sharing of user-generated content is also instrumental here, allowing Mutanga's work to be widely seen, shared, commented on, and probably remade by others.

But let's not forget that *Across the Spiderverse* is a tentpole production of the film industry owned by Sony Pictures and ultimately by the multinational media conglomerate Sony Corporation. Some would argue that Mutanga's "participation" in the making of *Spiderverse* was less an authentic, spontaneous, equal-footed collaboration between professional and amateur animators and more a carefully crafted promotional move that capitalised on fan labour. After all, the story of Mutanga – a 14 year old genius working on his videos at night after school, shooting to fame on a global level as a result of his own dedication, hard work, and innovative thinking – fits very well with the Spider-Man narrative and brand. Interestingly, this example also reminds me of the way Henry Jenkins himself uses the Peter Parker character (aka Spider Man) as an embodiment of the youthful, innovative, and DIY spirit at the heart of participatory culture (see the video below).



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://deakin.pressbooks.pub/communicationconcepts/?p=179#oembed-1

TEDxNYED | Henry Jenkins

A participatory culture, then, is defined by a range of opportunities (or openings) through which citizens can get involved in representational practices, where access to influential meaning-making is no longer restricted to elite social actors. But this does not mean that all communicators are equal, or that the products of participatory culture (including the virtual and digital *spaces* of participation) are not owned, controlled, and monetised by a handful of media companies and powerful individuals.

Ahead in Chapter 8...

Case study – Participatory culture, Doctor Who, and 'My Doctor' identity

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE, DOCTOR WHO, AND 'MY DOCTOR' IDENTITY

Serena Pantano

We've seen that participatory culture is an important feature of our current media landscape. But how does participatory culture relate to other communication concepts, like identity and fandom?

Identity is an integral aspect of participatory culture and fandom "with members of average and above average levels of group identification demonstrating sensitivity to group categorization and the psychological benefits and costs of engaging with their chosen media fandom." (Groene and Hettinger 2015: 324).

One way to illustrate this is through the *Doctor Who* fandom, and the 'my Doctor' phenomenon.

Doctor Who is a British science fiction television series that first aired in 1963. The series focuses on the adventures of an alien 'time lord' – the Doctor – who travels in time. It has experienced rich fandom over the decades and participatory culture aids fans in sharing their experiences and their fandoms online.

Although the series has focused on the same character throughout its run, the character has been portrayed by a number of different actors. The "my Doctor" phenomenon refers to a concept in which fans of the show will categorise themselves as identifying with a certain incarnation of the Doctor character. Through online fandom, many *Doctor Who* fans have described the idea of this identification.

It has commonly been stated that an individual's identified Doctor will be the incarnation of the Doctor that they first watched or "the one you watched when you were twelve" (Hills 2017: 213-215). However, it is evident that this is not always the case. Not all fans of *Doctor Who* began watching the show when they were young, and some may identify with a certain incarnation of the Doctor character or actor portraying the Doctor for a number of reasons. Fans may have differing answers for who they identify as their own Doctor, and who they think to be the best Doctor in terms of acting or writing. This suggests that these identities are formed through lived experience (Jenkins 2012 :50) and through other participatory practices.

The participatory audience of television shows such as *Doctor Who* "cut across traditional geographic and generational boundaries and is defined through its particular styles of consumption and forms of cultural preference" (Jenkins 2012: 1). However this audience still encompasses a recognisable, or number of recognisable, subcultures who engage in a number of distinct fan practices – including the "my Doctor" practice.



Image by Andrew Martin from Pixabay

Tumblr is a commonly used social networking platform for fandom interactions and the participatory building of fan communities, and as such provides a number of examples of identities within fandom. I analysed Tumblr posts tagged with #MyDoctor to illustrate these examples.

In the post below, one user describes the process by which they discovered their identity within the *Doctor Who* fandom:

"My first Doctor" by riversmithmelody | Tumblr | 18 February 2020

This post provides an interesting insight into the "my Doctor" identity. This specific example aligns with the idea that an individual's first Doctor will be *their* Doctor, and also provides insight into the participatory cultures of television shows. The user makes several references to the lore of the show, such as the TARDIS, and use these references to explain their identity.

Other examples of "my Doctor" posts on Tumblr suggest a strong connection felt between a fan of *Doctor Who* and the actor who portrays their preferred incarnation of the Doctor. Real meetings between fan and actor represent a culmination of this connection:

> "I met my Doctor yesterday. Next stop, everywhere." (margflower 2019) (This post also contained an image of the user meeting Christopher Eccleston)
>
> "I forgot to tell tumblr that I got Christopher Eccleston's autograph at NYCC and he sang to me while he signed it. So I'm good for the rest of time. Bye." (cherigroves 2019)
>
> "THIS WEEKEND! NOT A DRILL! MEETING MATT ON SATURDAY!!!!" (fluffyhales 2019)
>
> "I met David Tennant! Truly a dream come true. He was just as charming as I had hoped he would be. I've loved him for 10 years and I'm so happy I finally got to meet him in person!" (sideshowriting 2019)

Jenkins argues that television audiences "possess not simply borrowed remnants snatched from mass culture, but their own culture built from the semiotic raw materials the media provides". This post is a key example of that. The participatory audiences within the *Doctor Who* fandom have built a culture of participation and identity through the materials provided within the original source material, as seen through the "my Doctor" trend. It is evident that the identification of one's preferred or chosen Doctor actor/incarnation is an effective way to demonstrate identity within the *Doctor Who* fandom, and within participatory culture and fandom more broadly.

About the author

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Ahead in Chapter 8...

Problems with participatory culture

PROBLEMS WITH PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

The shift to a more participatory culture has led to profound changes in professional communication practice. Communicators today have found their roles redrawn to the extent that they are not simply imparting information to audiences and publics: they are managing online communities and establishing and maintaining dialogic relationships with audiences-as-participants.

To enable and support participation, communicators need to consider the accessibility of their content and to be attuned to the needs and practices of diverse publics.

Universal design is a term for the creation of products (including the products of communication) that are accessible to all abilities, with accessibility built into the product at the design phase rather than achieved through retrofitting. Applying to digital as well as built environments, universal design maximises participation by allowing as many people as possible to participate in and enjoy the benefits of public spaces.

Christa Teston and Yanar Hashlamon take this one step further with their proposal of "participatory design" as an alternative to universal design. Rather than assuming everyone's needs are universal, these authors argue, you can involve diverse groups in the design of your content to ensure you are serving diverse needs.

Practices that support inclusivity and diversity are therefore fundamental to professional communication practice today, but what is so interesting about participatory culture is that this professional domain now extends far further than it once did. Because we are all communicators with access to the means of production and distribution on a public (and potentially global) scale, we now share the responsibilities of communicators in traditionally "professional" roles. This relates to what Jenkins et al term the "ethics challenge" of participatory culture. In the previous chapter we explored the **effects** of communication. In a participatory culture, we are *all* responsible for such effects, but we don't necessarily receive the training required to prepare us for our "increasingly public roles as media makers and community participants" (2009: 3).

It's clear that there are many benefits to participatory culture. There is more space for marginalised voices and an abundance of new forms of civic engagement. For example, in Australia children under the age of 18 do not have access to civic participation in the form of voting – however, these children are also growing up in a media ecosystem that equips them with a variety of tools, platforms, and practices through which they can learn about, comment on, get involved in, form or join groups relating to, and lead conversations about important issues. Meanwhile, greater involvement of marginalised groups in media production leads to greater diversity in media content and more opportunities for dominant ideologies to be challenged in impactful, vastly public ways.

But a participatory culture is not a digital or communicational utopia. What do you think are some of

the problems and challenges associated with this excess of opportunities for participation? Here are some that I think are especially worth acknowledging.

Extra work for communicators

If you *are* a professional communicator, and you've been working in the industry for more than a decade, you may have found that your professional role and responsibilities have dramatically expanded. You're now expected to be across multiple platforms and skilled at countless digital communication modes. You're expected to engage with audiences on social media and to curate and manage your own online identity.

At times, it feels almost impossible to keep up with the pace of technological change. Upskilling isn't always an option – you may have limited financial resources with which to fund your continual reeducation. The boundaries between your professional and personal lives may have disappeared, and for communicators in particular it's harder than ever to switch off because you carry the tools of your job everywhere.

The fruits of participatory culture also include the so-called **gig economy**: the rise of a freelanced, casualised workforce where digital platforms are used to source jobs. This may mean you have less security than you'd like.

It's harder to be heard

For professional and amateur communicators alike, greater participation makes it harder to be heard, because there are *so many* competing voices and messages. And in such a crowded and complex space, communication can be challenging because it involves confronting a diversity of opinions and understandings. Harmful ideas can be amplified and are difficult to dislodge.

Filter bubbles and echo chambers

How exposed to diverse viewpoints are we really? The algorithms that personalise our online experiences tend to deliver us information that aligns with our previous media consumption patterns – this means we are less likely to encounter opinions that diverge from our own. The result can be a form of intellectual isolation.

If we're less likely to be confronted with views that differ from our own, does that make us *less* able to participate in civic discourse in meaningful ways?

Misinformation

Misinformation is false or misleading information that can be spread strategically or accidentally. The Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) defines misinformation as "false, misleading or deceptive information that can cause harm". As communication and culture become more participatory,

it is easier for misinformation to spread. Practices like **fact-checking** also become harder, because sources of information are more difficult to pin down.

As Mike Caulfield points out in his book on fact-checking, it's difficult for the accuracy of information to be determined when content goes viral. Not everyone who shares online content is guided by the same ethical frameworks as professional communicators.

> "Unfortunately, many people on the web are not good citizens. This is particularly true with material that spreads quickly as hundreds or thousands of people share it – so-called 'viral' content. When that information travels around a network, people often fail to link it to sources, or hide them altogether."

So misinformation can be malicious, but it can also be the result of poor digital practices and/or a lack of training.

Things to think about...

Who do you think is responsible for the spread of misinformation?

What role, if any, do you play in stopping the spread of misinformation?

What skills and competencies help you protect yourself, and others, from the harmful effects of misinformation?



Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay

The digital divide

Not everyone has access to the tools, technologies, knowledge and competencies that allow them to participate in this complex digital world. Returning to Jenkins et al's report, this is referred to as "The participation gap" (2009: 3). Digital exclusion is a phenomenon whereby individuals might face (often insurmountable) barriers to participation due to factors such as lack of knowledge or education, the cost of internet connectivity, or geography (for example, lack of stable internet connections in remote and regional areas, or in developing countries).

According to the Australian Digital Inclusion Index's 2023 report, 9.4% of the population are currently "highly excluded", and there is a considerable digital gap between First Nations and non-First Nations people in Australia. The authors of this report remind us that:

> "the ability to access, afford and effectively use digital services is not a luxury – it is a

> requirement for full participation in contemporary social, economic and civic life." (Thomas et al. 2023: 4)

In other words, if we find ourselves on the wrong side of the digital divide, because of where we live, our background, or our lack of education or income, we can suffer disadvantage in a culture that values and assumes participation.

Ahead in Chapter 8...

Media and digital literacies

MEDIA AND DIGITAL LITERACIES

In the previous section, you read about some of the problems associated with participatory culture. As more and more people get involved in digital and networked communication, things get complicated: yes, there are new opportunities, but there are also new challenges.

One solution to the challenges posed by participatory culture is that citizens become trained to be more competent users of media and digital technologies: they develop their **media and digital literacies**.

Media literacies are the skills and competencies that allow individuals to read, access, analyse, evaluate, share, and create media content, and to understand and participate in media processes. A media literate person, according to a much-cited definition, can "decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media" (Aufderheide 1993: 1). This definition was the product of an historic 1992 meeting of media educators and media literacy advocates convened by the Aspen Institute in the US, whereupon it was agreed that to be "media literate" means to understand the following:

> - media are constructed, and construct reality
> - media have commercial implications
> - media have ideological and political implications
> - form and content are related in each medium, each of which has a unique aesthetic, codes and conventions
> - receivers negotiate meaning in media.
>
> (Aufderheide 1993: 2)

In other words, media literacy allows individuals to be aware of the ways in which communication shapes reality. Media theorist James Paul Gee describes such knowledge as an understanding of "how people give meaning to and get meaning from media" (2015: 33).

Media literacy also encompasses knowledge about the operations, structure, and imperatives of the media industries. As Renee Hobbs puts it, media literacy education "pulls back the curtain on the political economy of the media" (Hobbs 2019: 3). In this sense, media literacy is about power: understanding the power relations that underscore the production and distribution of media, and empowering oneself through the acquisition of this knowledge.

Debated, dissected, and advocated for throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century, media literacy remains a hot topic in the twenty-first century and in the thick of participatory culture. Today, the most nuanced definitions of media literacy consider it to be both an ongoing process and a life skill. Hobbs, for example, describes media literacy and its sister term, digital literacy, as "a constellation of life skills

that are necessary for full participation in our media-saturated, information-rich society" (2010: xii). And while media literacy is often described as the product of formal media education, it can also be acquired through informal learning processes, for example through our participation in online communities where mentorship may help us sharpen our digital communication skills.

So if we are all participants in a complex process through which communication shapes meaning, and in which digital practices *have* meaning, we need media literacy. We need to ask questions, fact-check, and interpret and remake representations. Yes, a knowledge of the workings of digital platforms and the affordances of social and digital media will help you make an impact as a communicator. But as I wrote in Chapter 1, we don't study communication just because we want to do it *better*. We study communication because we have questions, and the questions – like it or not – see us unpicking the seams of common sense.



Image by Chen from Pixabay

Media literacy and misinformation

Is media literacy the answer to the misinformation problem? Perhaps. A media literate person can discern truth from falsity more easily, and can detect media bias. But, as danah boyd warns us, we shouldn't think of media literacy as the "silver bullet" solution to the complex problems of the digital age. Boyd (2018) suggests that we focus more on the teaching of **interpersonal skills**, so that young people who are rapidly acquiring the competencies that allow them to create and share content on YouTube, Reddit, Discord, Instagram, and countless other digital platforms also have the ability to empathise, to understand otherness, and to negotiate different perspectives.

And if we think of media literacy only as a protective measure, we are limiting ourselves to media effects

perspectives (see Chapter 7) and neglecting the range of things people *do* when they communicate in digital and mediatised spaces.

But it's also the case that media literacy can help us understand and perform our roles as communicators and audiences in an ethical way. The sense of perpetual inquiry at the heart of media literacy primes us to recognise misinformation when we encounter it. And at a time when everyday citizens can become involved in the spreading of misinformation, media literacy can slow the flow, so to speak, and encourage us to think critically and reflexively about the information we are sharing. As Henry Jenkins points out (2020), media literacy is more important than ever before when citizens are entangled in the spreading of misinformation about war, politics, climate, and health (particularly so in the pandemic years).

And this is where things get interesting, because media literacy intersects in vital ways with other literacies: health literacy, environmental literacy, social justice literacy. I began this book with an overview of some of the communication challenges that haunt our world in the early decades of the 21st century. These challenges are better confronted by media literate individuals who can share, negotiate, and recreate meanings with confidence.

Ahead in Chapter 8...

Chapter 8 wrap-up and a conclusion of sorts

CHAPTER 8 WRAP-UP AND A CONCLUSION OF SORTS

You have now finished Chapter 8.

...and you have finished reading *Communication Concepts*.

This book, too, is a product of a participatory culture. It has been a collective endeavour supported by the learning community of ACX701 Communication Concepts and, more broadly, the OER (open educational resources) community of practice at Deakin University. As you've seen, students have participated in the knowledge-work that created this book, adding their voices and perspectives so that we could take the object of communication, tip and turn it, pass it around, and explore it from many vantage points.

The writing of this book has also involved participation in the open textbook culture. Writing an open textbook involves remix practices, collaboration, and a sense of scholarly collegiality: I borrow from others – respectfully, and with attribution – and I respond to, adapt, and transform existing ideas, allowing my own ideas to be transformed in turn.

This to me is also the best of academic thinking. We engage with ideas, we respect and acknowledge the sources of information, and we respond, adapt, transform. In doing so, we participate in the building of knowledge.

And of course this book is a space of growth, because new members of the Communication Concepts learning community will participate in its ongoing development.

Thank you for reading!

Very best wishes,

Erin Hawley (February 2024)

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VERSIONING HISTORY

This page provides a record of changes made to this textbook. Each set of edits is acknowledged with a 0.01 increase in the version number. The exported files reflect the most recent version.

If you find an error, please contact opened@deakin.edu.au.

Version	Date	Change	Details
1.01	August 2024	Published on the Council of Australasian University Librarians (CAUL) Open Educational Resource Collective network.	This network was retired in 2026.
1.02	March 2026	Published on the Deakin eBooks network.	Due to retirement of original hosting network, OER was transitioned to the Deakin Open eBooks network.