
A G O R A

Communication

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and the Power of the Word

*“There is no such thing as
non-communication.”*
(Paul Watzlawick)

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THE VERY existence of life on earth has brought with it the communication process, a process highlighted by all sources, both religious and scientific. We consider that the presence of communication in all areas and sectors of the material and spiritual life deserves particular attention and a profound analysis. It is obvious that the human individual has evolved as a bio-psycho-social being and that ever since the beginning man has constructed a reality which has been permanently evolving. Even at the present time, the human being is still building reality as a basis of realities to come. It is hard to quantify how much sounds, words and gestures have influenced us, but it is certain that these three primary elements of communication have influenced human evolution to a smaller or greater extent. Communication is the basis for all interactions, for the learning processes, for solving problems, for social behavior, for any kind of emotions and creations, for religions, etc. If we were to choose a term, an action, a state of mind as the most important of them all, this would be extremely difficult

due to subjectivism, due to our own perception of the world and of reality. If instead we were to think about an action omnipresent in our life, communication would most certainly be one of the most frequent answers. The importance of communication in our life is given, in the first place, by the power of this process to embrace all human activities and states. At the same time, communication has always supported, and will always support, our development in terms of knowledge, state and action. The process has gradually evolved, alongside the evolution of life itself. This aspect deserves to be mentioned in order to better explain our present scientific approach.

Many pieces of evidence gathered by “anthropologists over more than a century”²¹ show that “the evolutionary process that eventually resulted in contemporary humankind goes back some 70 million years.”²² Regarding our species’ evolution, the evidence is dated 14–5 million years ago, with the appearance of the so-called Ramapithecus. “We are not even certain that it walked upright, but it may have been the first member of the family Hominidae (manlike creature).”²³ Researchers say that evolution occurred after the appearance of *Australopithecus africanus*, which is said to have existed 5.5–1 million years ago.⁴ Within the same evolutionist paradigm we would also like to mention that the evolution of the human species followed its normal course thought many evolutionary ramifications. One of this ramification was *Homo habilis* who “dates from between 2.2 and 1.6 mya.”²⁵ Another branch of humanoid, who used handmade tools, was *Homo erectus*: “by about 1.6 million years ago still another hominid (*Homo erectus*) was using finely chipped, two-edged hand axes and other cutting tools.”²⁶ A new step in evolution was brought by the Neanderthals who “began to occupy the European area and parts of the Near East some 150 to 125 thousand years ago.”²⁷ Anthropologists also present another evolutionary line. They consider that this line developed much later: “These were the Cro Magnon (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), who first appeared in parts of Europe and the Near East somewhere between about 90,000 and 40,000 years ago...”²⁸ Researchers consider that the Cro Magnon were more advanced compared to previous humanoid branches and this means they were closer to nowadays humankind.⁹

With the evolution of the human species communication also evolved, becoming more and more diverse in each stage. During this evolutionary history there have been the following communication ages: “the Age of Signs and Signals, the Age of Speech and Language, the Age of Writing, the Age of Print and... the Age of Mass Communication . . . and we have recently lurched quite unprepared into the Age of Computers.”¹⁰

The transformations of the human being throughout these periods of evolution in communication are fascinating to observe. Obviously, all of them are important but, from our point of view, special attention has to be given to the

invention of printing in Mainz (1455), by Johann Gutenberg, the one who offered humanity the first printed copy of his “42 line Bible . . . one of the finest examples of the printer’s art ever produced.”¹¹ We highlight the invention of printing because we consider that it marked a landmark moment that allowed the rapid multiplication of humanity’s writings and teachings. As a consequence of this phenomenon, in time, the price of books diminished and another extraordinary phenomenon occurred—mass access to information. This phenomenon led to changes in the human beings’ mentalities and implicitly to the quicker development of humankind.

In this introduction we wanted to point out some very important arguments and ideas regarding the evolution of communication and of mankind. At the same time, the introduction represents the motivation behind our present scientific approach, an approach which has been constituted around a fundamental hypothesis, namely, that the communication process is omnipresent and it represents the basis of mankind’s evolution and development. We have also taken into consideration the power of the word and the way communication influences us. As a research method we have used the content analysis. In order to demonstrate the abovementioned hypothesis we analyze the most important approaches that define, explain and present communication. We will next discuss and explain these approaches based on our knowledge and experiences. As stated before in this material, communication is an omnipresent process, extremely vast, hard to explain in a single definition. Therefore it was not easy to choose, from the multiple explanations and definitions given to this process, those that we consider most important.

As in the beginning of our work we have mentioned the evolutionist theory, we believe it is necessary to refer here to the religious approach to communication. Does the Bible offer an answer to the question regarding the nature of communication? Surprisingly, the Gospel according to John says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”¹²

The biblical vision is total, ample, perfect and immortal. From our point of view, this verse consists of the following parts:

1. *In the beginning was the Word*: this means that the word (or, by extrapolating, communication) lay at the foundation of everything that existed or has been done or created; we may even interpret these words in the sense that the word predates all creation.

2. *and the Word was with God*: from our point of view, this means that the he who had the word, the capacity to communicate, was the Great Creator himself, or indeed God himself.

3. *and the Word was God*: these last words express the boundless power of the word, meaning its Divine power.

From this verse's point of view, the "word" has three fundamental characteristics: it had existed from the very beginning and from the beginning it belonged to God, being God himself. Even if our subjective explanation can be contradicted by other theological and scientific theories, it is certain that the word (communication) is very important and has been cherished by both priests and scientists. We support this idea by virtue of the fact that both the Bible and the scientific discoveries were brought to the attention of the public by way of written or spoken words, in other words, with the help of communication.

We will further analyze this concept using explanations and definitions belonging to a series of specialists which have been studying this phenomenon.

Paul Watzlawick is the first author we would like to mention here. He gives the following definitions of communication, in his meta-communicative axiom as well as in some appreciations:

1. Communications is "a *conditio sine qua non* of the human life and social order."¹³

2. The meta-communicative axiom: "There is no such thing as non-communication."¹⁴

These two assertions convey a common message, sustaining the idea that we cannot exist in the absence of communication; basically, communication is inside each of us. Also, the author transmits the idea that life is meaningless without communication and that order, law, organization, hierarchy and behavior cannot exist without communication. In other words, Watzlawick considers that the communication process is omnipresent, being a basic element of our life and society.

The German professor Michael Kunczik has an interesting approach to communication. He tries to define this process by taking into consideration the problem of intentionality and non-intentionality. According to Kunczik and considering intentionality, communication is "a behavior which, from the point of view of the sender, aims to transmit messages from a person to another with the help of symbols."¹⁵ The same author, considering non-intentionality, defines the process as follows: "Communication comprises the interaction with the help of symbols and the non-intentional transmission of information through the communicator, interpreted as informative by an observer."¹⁶

Judging these two definitions as one, with this description Kunczik comes close to Watzlawick, because the German researcher considers that basically the human being communicates both intentionally and non-intentionally; therefore the possibility of non-communication does not exist. Watzlawick's vision is more general, but Kunczik introduces new elements into his definitions, such as: information, symbols, purposes, and transmission. Kunczik's outlook brings communication close to action, his explanations offering dynamic features to this process. Also, within the German researcher's approach, the two elements

of communication, the sender and the receiver, are clearly presented. Michael Kunczik's explanations regarding communication also suggest that communication is omnipresent in interpersonal interactions.

Denis McQuail is another very important researcher in the field of communication studies. In his book entitled *Communication* he explains what this phenomenon represents. A first definition brings him very close to Kunczik, because of the following ideas: "In normal use the verb to 'communicate' usually refers to an action of 'sending' a 'message' about 'something' to someone who is a receiver . . . First, there is a choice between the communication as sending or receiving since messages can be sent without being received and received without their having been consciously sent—as when we scan our environment and derive meaning from scenes, situations and unordered sense experiences. Second, and relatedly, there is the question of intention, which some definers like to include as characterizing communication act."¹⁷

McQuail also analyzes the phenomenon from other perspectives, considering that "Third, we can emphasise communication either as effect or cause of a given set of social relationships and pattern of interaction."¹⁸ This third way of understanding communication brings McQuail closer to both Watzlawick's and Max Weber's approaches to communication. For the latter, communication is very close or can identify itself with individual and social behavior. Weber emphasizes the subjective sense of our actions which, from our point of view, contains a high degree of intentionality. McQuail adds two more directions of analysis to his explanations regarding communication, stating that "Fourth, communication can be treated as linear (one way transmission) or as circular and interactive."¹⁹ This fourth direction of analysis focuses on the different ways of information transmission—linear, circular, and interactive—, ideas that underlie the main general models of communication: Harold D. Lasswell's linear model, Hiebert, Ungurait and Bohn's circular model (HUB) and the interactive model of communication. With these models, the authors tried to provide a general explanation of the mechanisms inherent to information transmission.

The last direction of communication analysis and explanation mentioned by Denis McQuail is the following: "Fifth, we can think of it as a source of order, unity and cohesion or as a cause of change, fragmentation or conflict."²⁰ This last explanation links communication to the concept of organization; cohesion means understanding, and fragmentation and conflict refer to misunderstandings and situations like crisis communication or communication in times of conflict. In this frame, according to Robbins, "it is considered that most of the conflicts are due to communication problems";²¹ on the other hand, communication is perceived "important in solving conflicts because it can increase understanding and reduce the risk of jumping to conclusions or making generalizations."²²

Because the power of the word was mentioned in our title, we would like to present here another idea belonging to McQuail, which refers to another dimension of communication, namely, influence: “Finally, there is a choice between an active or reactive view, the former when we try to influence others or our situation, the latter when we accept influence and adapt to circumstances.”²³ This last dimension of the analysis highlights the process of manipulation which cannot be obtained in the absence of communication.

There clearly results, from Denis McQuail’s perspective on communication, that this process is present within society as one of the key elements of its development.

Following the same idea of influence, of the word’s power to influence, of manipulation, we will further discuss the outlook of three other authors: Michèle Jouve, Isabelle Nazare-Aga and Alex Mucchielli.

With regard to communication, Jouve contended that “Not all our acts, decisions, beliefs are manifestations of the mind, of reasoning, because they are not always conscious. We are sometimes driven by inner forces that can exceed our power, which can remain obscure, which we do not analyze, to which we do not pay attention. And which we could miss even if we desired to observe them at any cost . . . Since it desires to be persuasive (meaning manipulative) communication is interested in finding support in these psychological elements, trigger mechanisms that make us permeable (meaning vulnerable) to the message.”²⁴

Michèle Jouve refers mainly to the psychological mechanisms which determine a certain type of behavior and which, practically, develop under the influence of communication, transforming this process into an influence and manipulation factor. As a consequence, the human being can be manipulated by the power of the word.

In her book entitled *Manipulators Are Among Us*, Isabelle Nazare-Aga supports the same idea—the connection between communication and manipulation: “The manipulator does not clearly communicate his needs, demands, feelings and opinions. But the impression he leaves us is the exact opposite (with the exception of the shy type of manipulator). Most of the times, we are able to decode his verbal and non-verbal messages (the tone of voice, facial expressions, looks, attitudes, etc.)”²⁵ “As a conclusion, the only way to communicate better is to express as clearly as possible the message so that the effect upon the interlocutor is equal to the transmitted intention. Someone clearly expressing his thoughts does not give rise to supplementary questions. A clear expression involves the transmission of all the necessary information in the same time in order to avoid any incorrect interpretation, having as a single purpose the good understanding of the intention of the message.”²⁶ It is obvious that clarity in articulation, together with a solid argumentation and coherence in thinking, elimi-

nates the possibility of misinterpretation, but it does not eliminate manipulation because we can either be influenced by persuasion or not, or more precisely by the speaker's clear thinking and articulation (which convinces us).

Alex Mucchielli is another researcher who considers that individuals can be influenced by the power of the word. In his book entitled *The Art of Influence* he gives the following definition of communication, a definition taken from another of his books, *Les situations de communication*, published in 1991: "To communicate means to use an ensemble of *communication* methods: it means to talk, to modulate your intonation, to behave in a certain manner, to adopt a certain facial expression, certain gestures and specific attitudes, to choose an attitude, to prepare combined actions, to elaborate physical or normative devices, to act on the elements in the environment . . . everything in order to resolve as well as possible a problem connected with a fact of life."²⁷

This definition clearly specifies that Mucchielli focuses on both: intentionality—the individual has an interest in solving a situation; manipulation—the individual somehow solves a problem, usually in his favor, and he adapts his communication in order to be able to influence the environment.

Mucchielli clearly expresses himself in regard to the connection between communication and manipulation: "Any communication is an attempt to influence. Communication truly seeks to transmit a sense (of an idea or of a situation, of a phenomenon, etc.), something which cannot be done without influencing. Influence is co-substantial to communication. To communicate and to influence represent the same action."²⁸ Mucchielli also considers that "The analysis of the act of influence is facilitated by the use of the great categories of the *communication processes* established within the theory of communication processes. These are acts of communication that intervene on the positions of the actors, on their relations, on their normative references and on their identities, but also on the elements of temporal, spatial and sensorial contexts."²⁹ "Influence is based on communication processes, unconscious, implicit."³⁰

These three authors offer a new perspective on this process, which states that certain psychological parts of the individual are involved, and focus on the direct and indirect influence. Also, intentionality is a parameter taken into consideration by these authors when they analyze communication. Every second of our lives we are bombarded with information which may lead to certain effects, states and reactions. It is obvious that some information affects us more and other less. From our point of view, the information which does not have a major (direct) impact on us determines certain psychic processes on a conscious or unconscious level, even if they only inform us. Information also requires cerebral effort. As a consequence, we state that influence is all around us, whether we influence the environment or the environment has an influence upon us;

and the information that stands at the basis of this influence may have different degrees of impact.

THE NEXT area where communication manifests its fundamental role is represented by misunderstandings, risk, crisis and conflicts. Cristina Coman, in her book entitled *Crisis Communication: Techniques and Strategies*, discusses the opinions of two authors: M. J. Palenchar, who tried to define risk communication, and K. Fearn-Banks, who is more concerned with crisis communication.

M. J. Palenchar's definition: "Risk communication is a community infrastructure, transactional communication process among individuals and organizations regarding the character, cause, degree, significance, uncertainty, control, and overall perception of a risk. Risk communication provides the opportunity to understand and appreciate stakeholders' concerns related to risks generated by organizations, engage in dialogue to address differences and concerns, carry out appropriate actions that can reduce perceived risks, and create a climate of participatory and effective discourse to reduce friction and increase harmony and mutuality."³¹

As it can be observed, the definition shows us that this type of risk communication has the role of preventing any created tension and of reducing misunderstandings. This type of communication has a transactional role in negotiating and understanding the potential sources of tension, which are fundamental parameters which have to be taken into account. By reducing misunderstandings or by creating connecting bridges, dialogue bridges, risk communication comes close to the area of public relations. If we look around us, we notice that every day we encounter at least one situation which can generate tension and that communication is essential and omnipresent in the risk area.

In K. Fearn-Banks's opinion, crisis communication is "the dialog between the organization and its public(s) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. The dialog details strategies and tactics designed to minimize damage to the image of the organization."³² Discussing about image we can define this concept as "the perception that the public has with respect to a person or object,"³³ or we can think about the perception of the whole organization.

Analyzing K. Fearn-Banks's approach to communication, we may observe that a part of the crisis communication is made before its start; one of the activities preceding a crisis is represented by risk evaluation. It is obvious that during this period risk communication will be employed. The crisis occurs, and also the need for crisis communication and for crisis management, when all solutions are exhausted. Regarding this subject, Cristina Coman has the following approach: "Crisis communication or the answer involves a multitude of activities

of sending certain messages to the organization's different audiences: internal audiences, mass-media, stakeholders, authorities, community, etc."³⁴

In the same K. Fearn-Banks' opinion, crisis communication also takes place right after the end of a crisis situation, because it is necessary to offer explanations, arguments to the interested audiences and to rebuild the communication bridges affected by the crisis situation. After a certain period, after stabilizing the situation, the connections will be set and developed by the institution's PR department.

Because in the framework of crisis communication we have mentioned the PR sphere, we will further present communication from the point of view of PR and institutional communication. In this matter, we would like to offer the arguments of some of the founding fathers of modern public relations: Doug Newsom (professor at Texas Christian University), Judy Vanslyke Turk (professor at the University of South Carolina) and Dean Kruckeberg (professor at the University of Northern Iowa). These researchers highlight the complexity of public relations offering the following arguments to the readers: "The complexity of PR's role prompted the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) to define fourteen activities generally associated with public relations: (1) publicity, (2) communication, (3) public affairs, (4) issues management, (5) government relations, (6) financial public relations, (7) community relations, (8) industry relations, (9) minority relations, (10) advertising, (11) press agency, (12) promotions, (13) media relations, (14) propaganda."³⁵

If we carefully analyze these 14 activities regarding public relations, we will see that communication is placed at number two. In the PRSA vision, mentioned by the three authors, communication is separately approached but it is also the basis for the rest of the 13 activities comprised within the PR concept. Alongside the American approach, where public relations reach maximum expansion at the level of society, we consider it necessary to also present a European perspective. We have chosen the definition of German researcher Heinz Flieger:

Public relations are understood as functional actions contributing to maintaining and developing the potentiality of the pluralist systems. PR consists of informational, communicational and interactive potentialities, capable to establish a climate of transparency and openness both within the organization and outside of it. The purpose of public relations is to make public and legitimize different organizations' interests, aims and negotiations. From a social point of view, through the responsible use of certain PR methods, instruments and techniques, supported by a serious scientific basis, these manage to create a transparent social system. Public relations will influence the organization's decision factors due to their function of integrating the system's internal and external realities. Also, they will influence the decision

*making processes within the social system contributing to conflict prevention and mitigation by offering compromise solutions. The social system's identity, integrity and reality will be improved with the help of all these.*³⁶

All fields of activity where public relations have a specific role are based on communication, on informational transfer and counter-transfer. Just like the other approaches, this one too highlights the multiple meanings of this concept and the fact that the process of communication binds together these human activities. As a conclusion, we would like to mention that this approach comes to state the omnipresence of the communication process, a process which helped the human society to become structured and to develop.

Because we live in an era when the mass-media play an overwhelming role, the last approach of this study will focus on the concept of media communication.

The first approach to communication within mass-media belongs to the same three American authors mentioned above in the context of public relations: Doug Newsom, Judy Vanslyke Turk and Dean Kruckeberg. We will present here their opinion about the public information (publicity) concept: "*Public relations* is often used as a synonym for *publicity*, but the two activities are not the same. Publicity is strictly a communications function, whereas PR involves a management function as well. Essentially, publicity means *placing information in a new medium*—either in a mass medium (such as television, newspaper or internet) or in a specialized medium (such as corporate, association, trade or industry magazines, newsletters, brochures, including quarterly corporate reports or CD-ROMS)."³⁷ As a consequence, any type of public information, including the mass-media one, has the communication process as its basis.

The second approach to the connection between mass-media and communication is also the shortest and clearest one and it belongs to Gheorghe Schwartz. In his book *Politics and Press*, he makes the following assertion: "Mass-media means communication."³⁸

The development of mass-media has rapidly increased in the past 50 years. The communication process has diversified into different electronic forms of transmission of information. About this topic Charles R. Berger considers that "within the context of the new communication technologies zeitgeist, the notion of mediated social interaction immediately brings to mind various communication options afforded by computers, video conferencing, video telephones, and mobile telephones."³⁹

Along with this dispersion and diversification of communication, with respect to mass-media, the effects these electronic means of mass communication have on people, as well as their power to influence, are very important. The vi-

sion about this phenomenon is well highlighted by Walther et al.: “The Internet and related technologies have the potential to have as great an impact on the social, organizational, political, and relational interactions of our daily lives as other media such as the television and the telephone have had in the past.”⁴⁰

The influence phenomenon is mostly observed in the political field in which politicians’ images or public reactions concerning the political field are presented and sustained online: “the Internet offers a wide scope of possibilities to engage in political activities like visiting political blogs, researching political information, following online news, participating in forums, discussing politics by e-mail, or organizing electronic petitions.”⁴¹

OUR SCIENTIFIC approach has focused on demonstrating our hypothesis that the communication process is omnipresent and it represents the basis of the humanity’s evolution and development. This isn’t just a simple working hypothesis; it is our belief with respect to this phenomenon’s importance and amplitude. All the above-mentioned approaches lead to a single conclusion: our hypothesis is validated and our belief proves to be true. Due to the complexity of the term, it would have been impossible to analyze all the forms and approaches to the concept of communication. Throughout this work we tried to take into consideration some of the most important names in the field, who have been preoccupied with the study of communication and who, through their work, led to the emergence, crystallization and development of a new field of research called communication science. Together with the validation of our hypothesis, we have observed the researchers’ difficulty in finding a complete definition of the communication process, because it is omnipresent and, furthermore, it constantly develops and permanently changes in keeping with the new realities, making its description impossible. For those who raised the question—what would the world be without communication?—we have an answer: this is not possible because the social dimension of the human being imperatively demands the existence of communication. From the two simple forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal, this process permanently developed and diversified contributing to the development of humanity and to the transmission of information towards the new generations. Communication isn’t just a support for our development and evolution, but also a basis for those who will come after us. In this study we have focused on the importance of communication within interpersonal relations, as interactions (between the human being and the environment) on a conscious or unconscious level exist permanently and they can influence us to varying degrees. These interactions are forms of informational transfer and counter-transfer, ultimately leading us towards certain states or beliefs regarding the surrounding reality. They are ways in which we

influence the environment or the environment influences us. At the end of this study we would like to emphasize the power of the word. The two approaches presented here, the religious and the scientific one, lead to the same conclusion: the word is very important and it has the power to influence us; with its help we can also influence others. Even if technique comes and amplifies this phenomenon, the word's power to influence comes from the interpersonal communication based on the verbal message or transmitted through non-verbal and paralinguistic forms.



Notes

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Abstract

Communication and the Power of the Word

This article refers to the concept of communication and to the power of the word. Through this study we wanted to highlight the complexity of the communication process, as well as the fact that it represents one of the engines of development in society. The first part of the article presents the main evolutionary periods of the human race, together with the most important stages in the crystallization and development of communication. The second part refers to the main theoretical approaches through which communication is explained and defined.

Keywords

communication, human being, word, power, manipulation, understanding, intentionality