A New Direction for Communication Theory: Medium as Instantiated in Communication

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Abstract

Former ANZCA president Robyn Penman (2012) has recently called for the ‘serious’ consideration of communication. This paper presents one means of doing so. In the current paper, I sketch the contours of a reconstructed holistic, medium-attentive theory of communication – one which takes the generative character of communication, per se, seriously. When we take this capacity seriously, a medium no longer appears merely as a channel awaiting content – as it is typically conceptualised in prevailing approaches to Communication Studies. In contrast, a medium is conceived as a social accomplishment made within communication itself. This alternative view of medium is reframed within a more general approach to Communication and Communication Theory. The paper is ultimately designed to prompt members of ANZCA to reconsider the everyday practicality of developing and exploring general theories of Communication.

Introduction

Communication has become little more than an empty word that, in humpty-dumpty fashion, we can twist to make it mean wherever we choose. - Robyn Penman

Problems with the Current Paradigm

In another paper presented at this conference, I have critiqued the common institutional placement of communication within academe. Penman’s (2012, p. 45) sentiment above captures many of the implications of this current state of affairs. First, communication appears in a position subordinate to cognate fields. Secondly, is the lack of a concise and coherent definition of communication itself. Taken together, this appears to lead to the continued failure to develop and integrate general theories of human communication – one useful in making sense of the coordinated production of meaning(s) in and across a variety of analytic contexts – a reality. Unattended and under-investigated ideas about what communication is, how it functions, and in what ways it is consequential to real people restricts both everyday and academic talk. In short communication continues to be relegated to the role of information transmission. My remarks in the current paper suggest this is the outgrowth of the lack of a clear definition of communication which includes a consistent analytic eye turned towards medium. Searching for communicational specification of just what a medium is, how it takes its shape, and what specific relationship it holds to communication indicates the marginal status medium holds in prevailing approaches.

While scholars such as Ito (2010) underscore the centrality of ‘media’ to daily life, seldom is there consideration of the communicational underpinnings of medium. In this way, what media are and how
they are understood to function in contemporary society is spoken about with such frequency that documenting all of the assumptions, roles, and impact of ‘the media’ would overwhelm this paper. An earlier yet still relevant critique of the currents swirling around prevailing conceptualisations of ‘media’ is Meyrowitz (1998). In his view, media are primarily – and incorrectly – conceived of as containers of information or meaning. Meyrowitz notes that what we commonly call ‘media studies’ has very little to do with media themselves. According to Meyrowitz, research across the field is typically concerned with the content understood to fill media.

As the typical conceptualisation goes, ‘media’ are seen as powerful because they are the entities through which persons are exposed a variety of messages (Watson, 2012). Accordingly, the character and impact of any given medium remains based on analyses either of their basic technological foundations or the content they are understood to distribute. The extraordinarily popular use of the phrase ‘social media’ is one ready example of such thinking. I have yet to read either a scholarly or popular research report which explains in, communication-theoretical terms, why Twitter is a ‘social’ medium but speech – for example – is not.

Again, and within common approaches to the relationship between communication and medium, research into technology almost always speaks about a medium as a channel through which information is transmitted. While useful in many regards, this takes for granted the generative capacity of communication itself. Consider, for example, scholars such as Orleber (2003) who offers no definition of medium whatsoever within his Practical Media Dictionary. Similarly, Watson and Hill (2008) fail to make a single mention of the term ‘medium.’ I draw upon sources such as these because one would expect basic issues of definition or scope to fall within introductory texts. While definitional or conceptual sketches of medium do exist, they often bear resemblance to the approach of Laughey (2009) who speaks of a medium only as a physical conduit through which messages are transmitted. All told, conceptualisations such as these extend an image of message and medium as preformed – existing to or preceding communication. In other words, the category of medium does not appear to be taken as problematic to our definitions of communication. In the end, the field avoids consideration of basic issues about what communication is and how it works by avoiding serious consideration of medium in communication.

Today, there remains scant investigation into the communicational underpinnings and/or communicational hierarchy of medium. Useful and paradigm-shifting work has been produced at the margins of the field in our recent past, however. Consider first, the work of Luhmann (1991). Nearly twenty five years ago he spent considerable time asking very basic and very general questions such as “what is communication” (p. 251)? Similarly – and notably, another generation prior – Dance (1967) articulated a series of questions and answers about “the concept of communication” (p. 288). A review of widely published and distributed communication theory textbooks such as Littlejohn and Foss (2011) and Griffin (2011) suggest the field has simply moved on from tackling these basic issues. Medium as Situating (found) vs Medium as Situated (made)
If we shift our gaze and consider a medium as made and communication itself as the making agent, we begin to sketch out a new view of both medium and communication. Below, I briefly examine three alternatives to prevailing notions of communication which hold the potential to elevate the analysis of the communicational making of medium. I consider first the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), which underscores the productive output of communication and uses socially-coordinated processes as a principle means of analysis. The second perspective, Social Communication Theory (SCT), provides further clarification that the actions described in CMM, while social in nature, are intensely mediated and that communication itself is sustained by the functioning of three distinctive yet co-produced orders. The last, and perhaps most neglected thread of theories on the margin of our contemporary cannon is Media Ecology (ME). In contrast to the other two bodies of work, this tradition places most of its analysis squarely on media themselves and considers the manner in which what CMM calls ‘patterns,’ and what SCT calls ‘orders’ grow out of the reliance on and connection to ‘media’ as structured, in part, on their technological foundations.

**Coordinated Management of Meaning – CMM**

First and foremost, CMM rejects the notion that communication is a process through which meaning or information is transmitted. From the framework of CMM, all there is is communication – the coordinated management of meaning. In sum, CMM is a theory of how people coordinate with each other for the management of making and sharing meaningful social worlds. One of the legacies of the nearly forty years of CMM development is this theory’s ability to encourage researchers to look at communication – consider how and when and where people coordinate and manage symbolic meanings – and not through it towards other issues and concerns.

CMM is an attempt to refocus upon the primary nature of human communication – the idea that “communication is a process of doing things and making things, not just talking ‘about’ them” (Pearce, 2007, p. 29). Below is one of the more enduring and more useful visual representations of Pearce’s (1989) attempt to articulate of ‘The Communication Perspective.’

From the point of view advanced in this paper, media might firstly be placed in the above diagram to take the place of resources. In doing so, persons are seen to both generate media and appropriate from them. Media might also, more significantly, sit within the label practices. Persons engage in media, but they also respond to them. If we take a holistic approach to media and include all the varied examples such as speech, clothing, physical proximity, as well as the common examples of twitter, YouTube, radio and television, we can entertain the idea that media are constructed in communication. In this way, CMM helps shift our gaze to view of medium as made in communication.

CMM places a focus on coordination as a key sensitising concept. As a body of literature, it has gained traction in recent years with the phrase persons-in-conversation. This seemingly awkward phrase expresses the notion that people live in patterns of communication. In other words, persons are fashioned from and in interaction. The perspective does not deny the material basis of people but rather underscores the meaningful category of personhood. In the same fashion, CMM might also be used to
suggest that a medium is a technology-in-communication. Like the previous example, this does not deny
the physical reality of technologies but rather suggests that the meaningful category of medium – while
based upon a technology – is made in communicating. The interactive nature of resources as sketched
out above also points towards the constraining outgrowth of resources. Once formed in communicating,
resources are both made in past moments yet constrain future moments of communicating.

**Social Communication Theory - SCT**

Social Communication Theory is both the name of a publication of Stuart J. Sigman (1987) and also an
articulation of the core features related to the general functioning of communication. Little
contemporary work, however, has carried Sigman’s (1987) radical treatise forward. Contemporary
scholarship is limited primarily to Leeds-Hurwitz (1989; 1993; 2010) and Merolla (2010). SCT has it
genesis in the “Penn Tradition” and owes much of its conceptual framework to the scholarship and
classroom teaching of Dell Hymes (1974), Raymond Birdwhistell (1970), and Erving Goffman (1967,

Like CMM (Pearce and Cronen 1980; Pearce 1989; 2007), SCT (Sigman, 1987) attempts to provide an
inclusive, if slightly elusive, definition of communication. Approaching communication from a very
general and abstract starting point, SCT suggests that:

…communication is the process of a group’s creation and maintenance of meaningful
differentiations between and among persons, objects, activities, and events. The rules or codes
of communication are the structural parameters by which these discriminations are made and
upheld…communication is considered a continuous process that requires behavioral
coordination, and not necessarily intersubjectivity as participants adhere to supraindividual
interaction programs (Sigman, 1987, p.102-103).

SCT’s strong orientation to societal structures sets it apart from most other communication theories
including CMM. Sketching out a view of communication as a practice oriented to, or governed by,
“supraindividual” codes and processes, SCT recasts communication away from monadic, individual
frames of analysis (p. 103). Defining communication in this fashion, Sigman’s (1987) SCT marks, from the
outset, a view of communication as societally patterned and sustained. In this way SCT repositions the
analyst’s attention toward historically situated, yet emergent, organisations of symbolic materials and
societal structures.

SCT’s approach to communication is also distinguished by its form of analysis which “does not focus on
the individual cognitive features” of persons but rather on “what it means to continuously be a member
of society” (p. 104). In what most strikingly reverses conventional notions of the relationship between
communication and culture, Sigman (1987) maintains the following:

Society and culture do not cause individual behavior; rather they are constituted by the
communication system which organizes meaning, that is, which enables behavior partials to be
functional and significant. The socioculturally defined codes of which the communication stream
is composed serve continuously to construct and constitute persons as social actors or social
identities.” (Sigman, 1987, p. 105)
The path cut out by a definition of human communication vis-à-vis SCT is informed by and motivated to address the problem of delimiting communicational perspectives from others. Indeed, it is within SCT that I feel the seeds for a future, and fully independent academic discipline of communication reside.

The issue of carving out a place for an independent communication perspective was the prime motivation for much of Sigman’s (1987; 1995) work. Commenting upon definitions of communication as well as the current status of Communication as an independent academic discipline, he offers up the following:

Social communication is not adequately studied within either linguistics or social psychology. It should be noted, however, that I do not consider interpersonal communication to be a level of communication (and hence a domain of investigation) separate from social communication. All of communication is social. Interpersonal communication is what is seen when the analyst limits his/her observations to copresent moments and messages, without examining multiorder, multiepisode patterns and functions. (Sigman, 1987, p. 67)

Most significant for the current paper is Sigman’s insistence above that “all communication is social” (p. 67). As I note earlier in the current paper, so-called social media are spoken about as preformed things imbued with pre-programmed technological characteristics.

In sum, then, SCT takes as its concern a general systematic approach to communication processes and captures both historically situated and emergent behaviours. As such, it speaks about communication as an ongoing, overarching and organising activity – one into which persons, and perhaps, technologies ingress. Sigman (1987), also maintains that SCT remains faithful to Birdwhistell’s (1970) mandate to model communication as an activity supported through the functioning of multiple simultaneous channels. Attending to these channels represents a very different starting point in the generation and testing of a theory of communication. Sigman adds:

We get an entirely different picture of communication if we recognize that communication is not just what happens in one channel. We cannot investigate communication by isolating and measuring one channel. Communication, upon investigation, appears to be a system which makes use of the channels of all of the sensory modalities. By this model, communication is a continuous process utilizing the various channels and the combinations of them as appropriate to the particular situation. (Sigman, 1987, p. 70)

In advancing such a concern, Sigman (1987) prompts the analyst to investigate the multiple, interdependent channels - or media - through which communication functions.

SCT also implies a strong ‘ecological’ approach to the study of communication. SCT’s interest is in the investigation of the overarching functionality supported in the combination of or alignments between channels or media. Accordingly, the various media which contribute important, yet partial supporting roles to the overall functioning of communication are called “infracommunicational” elements (Sigman, 1987, p. 62). Integral to the system, they only have their functional capacity in relation to the roles played by all others in the system.
Sigman (1987) articulation of SCT indicates communication is a process into which persons, institutions, and relationships participate and come into being. For Sigman, however, the key in modelling communication is to capture the interrelated and multifaceted nature of communicating. This is accomplished with the identification of what he calls orders. On the topic of orders, Sigman specifies:

In this manner, an order can be thought of as a set of interrelated resources (persons, objects, and so on) which are bound together – “ordered” – in some meaningful and coherent fashion. (Sigman, 1987, p. 62). An order is both organized and organizing. The specific functional import of an order is identified in its specific allocation of what CMM would call resources and practices. In this way, an order is one functional domain contributing to the overall dynamic of communication. In sum, SCT creates a composite model of human communication that weaves together the varied threads of what it views as orders. Although its articulation might benefit from repackaging, it also appears to successfully model human communication in very general terms and suggests that all human communication is both social and mediated.

Media Ecology – ME

If Pearce (2007) exemplifies a conceptualisation of CMM and its vision of communication and Sigman (1987) exemplifies SCT’s basic definitional approaches to what communication is and how it works, determining who or what exemplifies ME is a bit more difficult to establish. This stems from the reality that ME represents a collection of a large and varied assemblage of scholars. Although the work of Innis (1951; 1953) preceded McLuhan (1960; 1964), with its unique focus on the role of a medium or channel per se, it was McLuhan who truly captured the imagination of academics and citizens at large (Lum, 1996).

Writing in aphoristic catch phrases, McLuhan (1964/1994) was despised as much as he was adored. In the one phrase considered his most enduring contribution to ME, however, we have both an insight into his approach to medium as well as a rarely examined misnomer. I speak of the phrase “the medium is the message” (1994, p.7). Because it positions its analytic lens so intensely on the medium of communication, definitions of communication in the ME literature are also difficult to pin down. Those that are offered tend towards a concern with context made within or the environment sustained by one medium when compared to another. This is a very different take on communication than what is offered in either CMM or SCT.

What ME does share with these two other perspectives however, is a departure from a view of communication as information transmission. The hard-edged ME tradition of McLuhan (1994) and Postman (2005), for example, maintains a focus on medium to the detriment of everything else in communication. Postman (1985), for example, maintained “the clearest way to see through culture is to attend to its tools for conversation” (p. 8). Conversations in Postman’s sense are seen as either more serious or more entertaining and this character is seen to stem directly from the medium employed. The general idea across ME is that the form of medium used to initiate and sustain patterns of communication directly imbues the character of the people and cultures who become dependent upon them.
Clearly articulated definitions of communication are also difficult to establish within ME. Casey Man Kong Lum (1996), however, distinguishes himself from others in the field and presents an explicit definition of communication within a ME frame. Lum, a former student of Postman, defines communication as: 
...the ongoing sense-making experience whereby people, using shared symbols, create and negotiate the legitimate, the significant and the sensible, their sense of reality, their culture (Lum, 2006, p.7) 
Lum (2010) has also recently provided a comprehensive overview of ME scholarship and places into context the general difference to communication theory embodied in ME. According to Lum, the primary characteristic of ME thinking and research is its emphasis on the channel – medium – of communication and the types of communication, art, and social life possible given its use. While CMM speaks to ongoing reciprocal patterns and SCT speaks to the role played by the ordering effects of communicational structure, ME speaks to the potentiality or effect of medium.

According to Lum (2006) it was Neil Postman who took care – from the very beginning of the field – to imply what should characterise ME. As Lum explains, Postman first spoke the phrase media ecology 1968. He is reported to have done so to stress the environmental aspect of one medium when contrasted to another. According to Lum, Postman added:

We put the word media in the front of the word ecology to suggest that we were not simply interested in media, but in the ways in which the interaction between media and human beings give a culture its character, and one might say, help a culture to maintain symbolic balance. (Postman in Lum, 2006, p. 62).

Lum (2006) also posits a reciprocal relationship held in the communicative matrix vis-à-vis his conceptualisations of what media are and why they matter for our study. In explaining the genesis of the term media ecology, Lum speaks about media as environment and environments as media. In this way ME promotes sensitivity towards the importance of medium as an integral structuring element of all forms of human communication.

The distinguishing contribution provided by ME to the study of communication, in particular the work of Postman (1985), is its unrelenting nudging of the direction of our analytic gaze towards medium itself – irrespective of content. In Postman we find a coherent and compelling distinction between medium-ecological views of communication and the prevailing content-centric ones:

We rarely talk about television, only what is on television - that is, about its content. Its symbolic ecology, which includes not only its physical characteristics and symbolic code but the conditions in which we normally attend to it, is taken for granted, accepted as natural (Postman, 1985, p. 79).

In this passage, Postman subtly but significantly suggests that the conditions by which we attend to a medium are actually what contributes to the production of a medium. In other words, it is communication – not the natural bias of television as a technology – which leads to a symbolic ecology or symbolic code of such a ‘channel.’

Media ecology has brought scholarly attention to technologies of communication and has served the field well by shifting attention away from prevailing biases found in our field’s seemingly endless analyses of content. Shifting attention to the character and social utility of media themselves, ME has
also proffered a novel answer to questions about how varied media of communication matter. Moreover, figures such as McLuhan (1960) and Postman (1985) speak of speech as a medium and in doing so bring a strong orientation towards the idea that all human communication is mediated. Outside ME, rarely do we encounter such an explicitly stated idea.

**Integrating CMM, SCT, and ME into a New Theory**

Taken on their own, CMM, SCT, and ME outline complimentary yet not fully overlapping ontologies of communication. The central question and one that remains unanswered by each of these perspectives is how a medium is fashioned from a technology as situated within the unfolding process that is communication. This, I feel, is an essential question to answer as it holds the promise of demystifying communication theory and placing the knowledge framed by it into a practical frame useful for both scholars and everyday citizens alike. Accounting for the productive capacity of communication also holds the potential for closing the major gaps currently standing between medium ecological and social communicative literatures.

While CMM and SCT have investigated the making capacity of communication in this regard, they appear to have left aside explicit investigations of medium. New insights into the ‘nature’ of communication, however, just might be one result of using CMM and SCT to examine the processes by which a medium is made. In essence, and in contrasting ways, each of these bodies of work represent an opportunity to refocus attention on the centrality of communication to the relationships held between technologies and media.

Accomplishing this task requires clearing the deck, so to speak, and assembling a tightly organised – and fully general – form of communication theory. While few scholars have appeared willing to so narrowly delimit communication theory from other perspectives in this way, perhaps it is time to condense our concepts and theoretical starting points. Writing a rejoinder following the publication of a series of articles in Communication Theory in 1992, Sigman did exactly this. Below, are the two criteria he suggests are useful for judging whether or not a theory is, at its roots, communicational:

1. It is stated and statable so as to refer to communication phenomena generally and not to any specific local, group, or context of communication.
2. It refers to the interactional or processual production of meaning (significance, value, order).

(Sigman, 1992, p.352)

Applying such a mandate to the multitude of theories of communication gathered for presentation in review volumes such as Littlejohn and Foss (2011) would winnow this number down significantly. Such a move is not the motivation of my use of theory in the current project. Rather, what I intend to do is call for building a new and shared vision of communication theory that draws together currently disparate perspectives into a refocused study of medium.

Sigman’s (1992) SCT in particular casts aside “linguistic, sociological, social psychological and cognitive processes” typically invoked as a priori organising principles in theories accounting for human communicating (p.355). I feel this is a much needed next step. Additional motivation to do so is found in
Cronen’s (1998) call for a 21st Century communication theory which abandons the current concern with ‘interior’ or psychological models of communication. Sigman (1992) and Cronen (1998) outline a substantial challenge to the status quo of communication studies. In all cases, however, they appear to share a real concern for the future of the field.

The key issue to resolve in the merging of CMM, SCT, and Media Ecology, is the construction of an account of communication in step with its medium-making or medium-organising capacity. The specific contribution a medium makes to the overall patterning and function of communication has not generally been incorporated into mainstream communication studies. For medium ecologists the issue at hand is the impact different media have on the process of communication. Meyrowitz (1994) penned the name ‘medium theory’ as an explicit means by which to refocus scholars’ attention toward aspects of media other than those associated with content. While Meyrowitz suggests that a medium might variously be considered a container, a language, or an environment, both Meyrowitz and Foss and Littlejohn (2011) agree that within communication theory, most theories of communication refer to medium only in its role as container. Ironically then, even within ME scholarship, there appears a default view of communication which conceives of a medium as a found object - one preceding communication. Simply put, ME scholarship alone does not conceive of a medium as made within communication.

Furthermore, ME does not specify the contours of the communicational relationship forged between a technology and a medium. This leaves as unspecified the general nature of communication as an organising activity. This also becomes problematic for the continued development of general communication theory. Issues such as these leave unresolved many questions. In reference to ME, not attending to them appears to lead to the spectre of technological determinism. Certainly there is something about the design features of one technology as contrasted against another that accounts for some of its differential impact. Within current and historical ME scholarship, however, there appears little programmatic accounting of these features against the backdrop of a larger, communicational analysis.

My final rationale for incorporating ME into what I feel is an example of a new template for the executing communication research is provided by Lum (2006). Consider the manifold opportunities in the following excerpt for new research, drawing up SCT, CMM and ME into the co-productive relationship between medium and communication:

But on another, realistic level, we live in a multimedia society in the sense that we use a combination of a number of media or symbol systems at our disposal for communication purposes. To varying degrees, people use or otherwise are exposed to or engage in more than just one medium in their everyday life for news and information, entertainment, and communication. As can be imagined, the multimedia sensorial environment is a great deal more complex in nature and difficult to study than the single-medium sensorial symbolic environment that has been described previously…our task is to examine the dynamics among the co-existing media and how their interactions may result in or constitute to a sensorial-symbolic environment whose whole is qualitatively different from the sum of its sensorial-symbolic parts. These taken
together are the ‘unique symbolic environments’ whose complex new languages, as Carpenter (1964) would have suggested, has yet to be discovered.” (Lum, 2006, p.30-31)

Lum understands that persons contribute to and draw upon multiple media simultaneously. Within ME scholarship, this is a valuable insight into the unique, but interdependent parts of communication which combine to make the sharing of meaning and use of technology possible. In sum, Lum’s take on medium suggests that communication, indeed, holds a generative quality and this perhaps is the most profound feature which fulfils one key ‘nature’ of the process intimated by Birdwhistell (1970).

**Conclusion**

From the vantage point taken following my review of the above scholarship, it seems to me that what is needed in the field today is a fully general, communication-centric definition of medium. Such a definition would need to be sensitive to and focused upon the intertwined impact of technological and communicational influences. I offer this direction here as general or abstract conceptualisations of medium are difficult to locate in current literature. The dramatic expansion of digital, networked, and other electronic technologies appear to be driving a new push towards investigating what form communication will take as more of our social experiences become mediated through new technologies. Current literature, however, continues to speak of communication as a process that is only sometimes mediated.

Inattention to communication as a fundamentally medium-creating – and dependent – activity continues to act as the principle barrier against investigation of the concerns raised long ago by Birdwhistell (1970). But if communication is instead conceived of, as Sigman (1987) suggests, a tripartite and highly consequential feature of what it means to be a person, we hold in our hands the possibility of discovering the character of communication. This new working definition suggests that communication is inherently and intimately societal, demanding of and guiding coordination, and unavoidably medium-based.

If a medium, like personhood, is not a found object but is rather instantiated within and according to communication, accounting for its dependence upon systemic communicational processes holds the promise of accounting for the means by which an out-of-the-box technology is translated into a medium. This may not prove to be an easy task. As I have indicated above, defining a medium requires a good deal of conceptual sculpting. One need only search for the use of the words ‘medium’ and ‘media’ to experience the mammoth task ahead. Journals, for example, continue to include the word mediated in their names and editorial policies as a means by which to articulate their focus. Even Lin (2003), a scholar who proposes a comprehensive model of communication, speaks about ‘mediated communication’ as a distinctive form.

The idea that persons, relationships, and yes media themselves only feature as ‘moments’ within communication elevates our concern with the productive capacity of a fleeting, ever-changing dynamic which creates ‘things’ relied upon so heavily that their invention within communication becomes invisible. Once configured within a societal group and relied upon for getting on with others, an iPhone,
for example, becomes an invisible functional part of this stream. However, the iPhone, just as magnetic cassettes and clay tablets before it is only a momentary medium - fashioned from technological shells - in communication. Outside communication, that is, outside the interdependent organising forces (see Cronen, 2006, Pearce, 1989) of the societal and coordination orders a technology is and can only be “just a machine” (Postman, 2005, p. 84). Removing a technology entirely from its situated communication stream appears to mute its role as a medium.

We have hard, but rewarding work to do. Coalescing previously disparate streams such as CMM, SCT, and ME, presents communication theorists with rich materials for the reconstruction of relevant, general models of communication. Shifting our attention away from technologies as causal objects and onto larger processual dynamics facilitated in communicating also holds the potential to integrate the inspiration of ME with general approaches such as CMM and SCT. Such a move would address one key issue long addressed by media ecologists – the importance of medium to any and all contexts of human communication. Once this is accomplished, the field might finally hold the possibility of underscoring the centrality of communication in the human experience.

References