

**TOWARD COMMUNICATIVE VIRTUOSITY:
A MEDITATION ON MODERNITY AND OTHER FORMS OF
COMMUNICATION**

© W. Barnett Pearce

School of Human and Organization Development

Fielding Graduate University

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Department of Communications and Social and Political Theories

Russian State University for Humanities

Moscow, Russia 103012

If we are to live in a better social world, we will have to make it. Our chances of making a better social world will improve if we develop "communicative virtuosity" – the ability to discern and differentiate among forms of communication, and to call into being preferred forms of communication. In this paper, I offer some concepts that might be useful in developing communicative virtuosity, including a radical notion about taking a "communication perspective" and some meditations on the consequences of modernistic communication.

The inclusiveness of the pronoun "we" in the first sentence of this paper is perhaps the most striking characteristic of the social and material conditions in which we live. The "we" includes you in this seminar in Moscow and me in my study in Redwood City, California; it includes rice farmers in India, cotton farmers in Egypt, coffee farmers in Colombia, and automobile manufacturers in Japan and Germany. To an extent

unprecedented in human history, what happens anywhere is relevant everywhere; what any of us does affects all of the rest of us. Some call this "globalization," others "postmodernity."

My thesis is that modernity has been the primary force in the development of the contemporary, postmodern world, but that, as a form of communication, modernity is ill equipped to deal with the conditions that it has created. Taking a "communication perspective" on modernity and its alternatives provides a useful way of understanding where we are and a guide for how we might act wisely into the situation confronting us.

THE COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Although modernity is world-wide, it emerged at a specific moment in history and was shaped by specific circumstances (Toulmin, 1990). To the extent that modernity has provided our intellectual frame, it has trivialized communication and imposed conceptual blinders that make it difficult for us to imagine other possibilities. Although this should be the topic of a much longer, more nuanced discussion, we might say that modernity treats communication as something that should be an odorless, colorless and tasteless vehicle of thought and expression and valued it only to the extent that it is a site or carrier for something else (Penman, 2000, pp. 17-29).

The "communication perspective" stands as a deliberate alternative to a modernistic concept of communication. The key move is to focus on communication itself as material thing (the early modernists dismissed it as "immaterial" and hence unimportant). Sigman (1995, p. 2) notes that, because it is material, the form or shape of communication is consequential. "What transpires during, within, and as part of persons' interactive dealings with each other has consequences for those persons...Communication is

consequential both in the sense that it is the primary process engendering and constituting sociocultural reality, and in the sense that, as it transpires, constraints on and affordances to people's behavior momentarity emerge."

Looking *at* communication, not just *through* it to see how it affects other things, gives us a way of thinking about the events and objects of the social world that differs substantially from the modernistic way of thinking. Our attention is drawn to wholes rather than parts; to dynamics rather than to substances; to reflectivity rather than linear relations; and to interactions rather than single actions. As a perspective, it names an insight that Richard McKeon (1957) described in this way: "Communication does not signify a problem newly discovered in our time, but a fashion of thinking and a method of analyzing which we apply in the statement of all fundamental problems" (p. 89).

This fashion of thinking treats the events and objects of the social world -- such things as beliefs, personalities, attitudes, power relationships, and social and economic structures -- as *made*, not *found* (Pearce, 1989, pp. 3-31). Taking a communication perspective, the most useful questions are not "can you hear me?" or even "do you understand me?" They are "what are we making together?" or, referring to specific events or objects such as a person, an organization, or a culture, "how is it being made in the process of interaction?" or, "how can we make better social worlds?"

These questions presume a very different philosophical context than modernity provides. Following Bernstein (1983), I think that the intellectual frame of modernity is a neurosis that we should simply "get over" rather than labor long to refute. In its place, I suggest what we might call the "Heyerdahl solution."

The large carved stone faces on Easter Island have provoked many explanations. Some have suggested that they showed that the Egyptians who built the pyramids had traveled to the South Pacific; others claim that they could only have been constructed by an advanced alien civilization from outer space. Using the method that I suggest we imitate, rather than analyzing the final product (the stone heads themselves), Heyerdahl (1960) sought to learn the process by which they were made. He asked a native of the island if he could make one of the megalithic statues. When told that he could, Heyerdahl hired him to do so and filmed the process from beginning to end.

In many ways, the “communication perspective” simply consists of applying the “Heyerdahl Solution” to such things as arguments, political policies, and interpersonal relationships. Like Heyerdahl, we shift from asking about what they “are” and begin to look at how they are “made” (Pearce, 1994, pp. 66-70).

MODERNITY AS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

Everyone lives in "modern times," Brinton (1963, p. 22) noted, "but they have not always been so much impressed with the fact. Our own time...is the first to coin so neat a term and apply it so consistently...This awareness of a shared newness, of a way of life different from that of one's forebears – and by 1700 awareness of a way of life felt by many to be much *better* than that of their forebears – this is in itself one of the clearest marks of our modern culture."

Because it takes the communication perspective, the description of modernity that follows differs from (but does not necessarily contradict) those offered by historians, political scientists, economists, art historians,

and sociologists. Further, and I write this with some apology, it uses certain concepts developed in a particular theory of communication called the Coordinated Management of Meaning (for more information on this theory, see http://russcomm.ru/eng/rca_biblio/p/pearce.shtml and http://www.pearceassociates.com/essays/cmm_pearce.pdf.)

Modernistic communication occurs when people act out of stories that define change as good, the worth of a person as being an agent of change (that is, "making a difference"), and rationality and experimentation as the means of change. These stories give rise to any number of narratives with strong family resemblances: they value replacing superstition, ignorance, impotence or tradition with knowledge and effective action; they assume that taking these actions will produce "progress;" they undercut tribalism and hierarchy and replace them with the notion that all of us are fundamentally the same; and they stress the importance of the individual in making judgments and taking action. Prototypical examples include Galileo, who was willing to overthrow the then-dominant model of the solar system because he observed moons around Jupiter through his telescope (after being threatened with torture if he did not repudiate his beliefs, he is reputed to have whispered "but it still moves"); Martin Luther, who was willing to overthrow the domination of the Catholic Church because its practices did not fit his own interpretations of the Scriptures (instructed to recant, he said "Here I stand, God help me, I can do no other"); and every teenager who tells his or her parents that he or she not only will do things differently than they did, but should do so.

From the communication perspective, we might ask what gets made in this type of communication. From within modernism, the answer is "progress;" the old ("bad") traditions and practices are replaced, through the

heroic work of experimenters, explorers, and entrepreneurs, with new ("better") traditions and practices, thus replacing ignorance with understanding and equipping us as individuals and as a society to live better. As Berman (1982, pp. 345-346) said, "To be modern...is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction; to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a *modernist* is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom; to make its rhythms one's own, to move within its currents in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows."

From outside modernity, however, there is an important question about "time." Specifically, many people reject modernity's linear story of a sequential progression from old to new and from bad to good. Figure 1 depicts what they see as the real story of modernity as a "strange loop." The statements at the top of the Figure are the dominant stories; the pattern within the bracket describes a process that – following the arrows -- goes like this: start with any existing belief, practice or social institution. The fact that it already exists means that, from a modernistic perspective, it is "not new." Because change is good and personal identity and worth derive from making changes, the modern communicator sets out to change it. Because modernity has in it tools of exceptional power for deconstructing existing entities and discovering/inventing new ones, it is very likely that the modernistic communicator will succeed, producing something about which he or she can say "this is new!" Again, because new is valued, this legitimates a celebration.

Defining stories of modernistic communication:

- Change is good
- Self-worth and identity come from being the agent of change
- Change is brought about by rationality and experimentation; tradition, superstition, and ignorance are to be replaced with knowledge and effective action

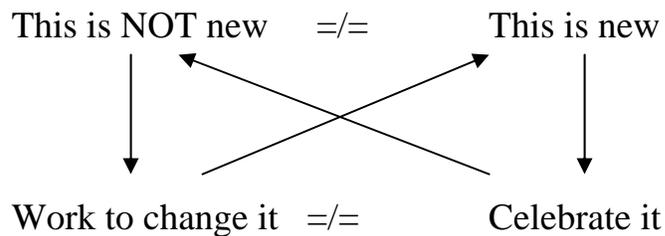
Pattern (strange loop) of modernistic communication practices:

Figure 1: The strange loop of modernistic communication
(adapted from Pearce, 1989, p. 145)

If the sequence of arrows in Figure 1 ended with "celebrate," it would describe a linear movement from old/bad to new/good that constitutes a triumphant affirmation of progress. But how long can one celebrate the "new" thing before realizing (or someone else declaring) that it is no longer new? An international telecommunication company had been working for five years to develop the "second generation" technology for satellite cell phones. When the new product was finally introduced into the market, those who worked on it were invited to a celebratory party on a Saturday morning. After lunch, the company President congratulated them all and announced

that on Monday morning, they would all start work on the "third generation" of the technology. This initiated the next multi-year cycle of the strange loop after a celebration that lasted for less than a day.

The model in Figure 1 directly contradicts the story of modernistic communication by suggesting that progress is not an ever-ascending line, but that the actual pattern produced by the coordinated quest for the new and better forms a loop that turns back on itself. To describe modernistic communication, then, we need vocabulary that speaks of cycles and patterns, not just linear measurements. So let us speak of *cycles*, *periodicity*, *punctuation*, and *emergent properties*.

By what metric should we measure the periodicity of the strange loop of modernistic communication? Let me suggest the human lifetime. If the strange loop takes approximately one lifetime, then those involved can easily see it as a linear process, because their own experience will never bring them back to the place where they started. Whether their story is one of progress (from "this is not new" to a celebration of that which is new) or decline (from the celebration of that which is new to the recognition that it is no longer new) has to do with the punctuation: at what points one "starts" and "finishes." Of course, punctuation is arbitrary; it is a function of the timing of one's birth and death in relationship to the cyclical movement through the loop, not of the looped cycle itself.

But what if the periodicity is much shorter than a human lifetime? In the development of computers, the product innovation cycle is not only very short as measured by this metric, but getting progressively shorter. I once asked a computer salesman if I could buy a computer that would not be obsolete within a year; his answer, "no."

And what gets made if the periodicity is imbalanced? That is, if the work to change things is relatively long and the periods of celebration proportionately short? Even though they may have "made a difference" according to the values of modernity, the workers in the telecommunications company I cited above might reasonably feel that the quality of their lives was less than it might be.

What gets made in a process described by the strange loop in Figure 1 if the periodicity is short relative to a human life and if the cycle is imbalanced, with long periods of work and short periods of celebration? Among other emergent properties, nothing has value except change itself. That is, as the wheel spins faster and faster, different things are temporarily "new" but their worth dissipates when the celebration ends. My theory of communication originated out of my perception that the "old" theories were not satisfactory. I worked hard to create something newer and better and, in my own mind anyway, succeeded. But before I even started celebrating this accomplishment, some of my colleagues and graduate students took my theory as "old" and have set themselves to produce something newer and better. So the time available for my celebration is limited, bounded by the time it takes my colleagues to produce the "next" new thing (or my ability to ignore the rising clamor of critique and further development).

In addition to certain notions of time and value, modernistic communication makes strong individuals in weak communities. It rejects the traditions that separated us from each other on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, economic class, gender, religion, etc., and replaces them with strong affirmations of individuality. However, this same process also undercuts the basis of community, leaving us as deeply interconnected

individuals without a sufficient story to describe our relationships and interdependence.

MODERNITY AS ONE FORM OF COMMUNICATION AMONG MANY

In thinking about forms of communication, the "Heyerdahl solution" is a crucial first step, but we quickly run into its limitations. Heyerdahl developed a convincing explanation of how the Easter Island heads were carved and lifted into position; but his method had no means for explaining why the rock carvers invested so much of their energy to this task or what significance the stone carvings had for those who lived in their shadow.

I'm deeply indebted to my colleagues at the KCC Foundation in London (<http://www.kcc-international.com/>) for teaching me to inquire, when I was trying to understand anything about the social world, "what system do you have in view?" The wisdom in this question recognizes that what one sees depends on the breadth of the view that one takes. Heyerdahl focused only on the stone carvings; he would have had to use a different methodology and different vocabulary to answer questions of social significance.

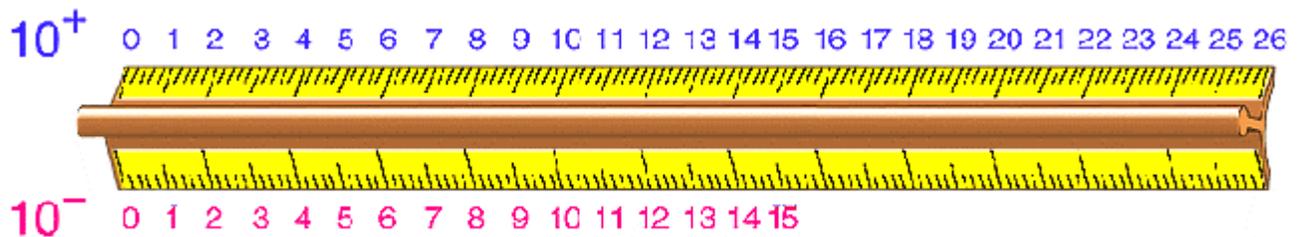
Those of us who study communication observe and report very different things. I have visited departments of communication in which I have felt like I was a total stranger and that I had little or nothing to add to the conversations in the classes they offered. One reason for this, I believe, is that we have different systems in view. In the paragraphs below, I suggest a vocabulary that might begin the process of helping us sort out our units of observation, and explain what I mean by "forms of communication." Specifically, I suggest that we think about time, or at least temporal breadth,

and use a vocabulary that differentiates *acts*, *actions*, *episodes*, *patterns*, and *forms*.

To set the context for this vocabulary, I want to play off two wonderful books. In *One Human Minute*, Stanislaw Lem (1986) reviewed a (fictitious) book that attempted to give a complete description of everything that every person on earth is doing in a single minute. Unlike the author of this book, I'm not interested in statistics about liters of blood pumped through arteries per minute; but like the author, I find it interesting to think of what all human beings are doing at any one time. Assuming that one-third are sleeping, a very high percentage of those awake are communicating: speaking, listening, reading, writing, watching television, painting billboards, etc.

But I've also learned that it is impossible to understand the significance of what is being done if all we do is to look at such a temporally thin slice of time. Try this as a thought-experiment: you are walking down a street and hear a woman's voice that you do not recognize saying "Don't do that again!" If this one message is all you have to go on, you really don't know how to respond. Was the message directed at you or at someone else? What did you do that she urges (or commands or instructs or advises) you not to do again? But maybe it is not about you at all. Perhaps it is a cry by a mother trying to teach her daughter not to run into the street. A plea by a wife arguing with her husband. An order by a doctor admonishing her patient not to skip taking her medicine. A part of a conversation among friends in which one quotes a part of the dialogue from a favorite movie or television show. A bit of self-admonishment by a tennis player who has developed a disconcerting habit of hitting her forehand too long.

To understand even such simple communication events, we need to look at larger temporal units, and I've borrowed an idea from physics. Figure 2 shows a photograph of a flower from the garden in the laboratories of CERN and a measuring instrument marked off in powers of plus and minus ten. On the CERN website, you may click on any of the numbers and the photograph changes to show what that flower looks like if the perspective is changed by the corresponding powers of ten meters.



If you go to <http://microcosm.web.cern.ch/microcosm/P10/english/P0.html>, you'll find this beautiful picture of flowers on the grounds of CERN. By clicking on the scale, your perspective will increase or decrease by the indicated power of ten. I'm suggesting a scale something like this in which the scale is in time (duration; number of "turns") rather than distance (meters) as a way of clarifying what we are naming in communication.

Figure 2. Powers of ten in perceiving a flower.

Is it possible to do something similar with units of observation of communication? I think we are far from it, but as a start, in the laughably simplistic Figure 3, I've invented and borrowed some ideas to suggest a gradient in the temporal extension of what we see/think of when we analyze communication.

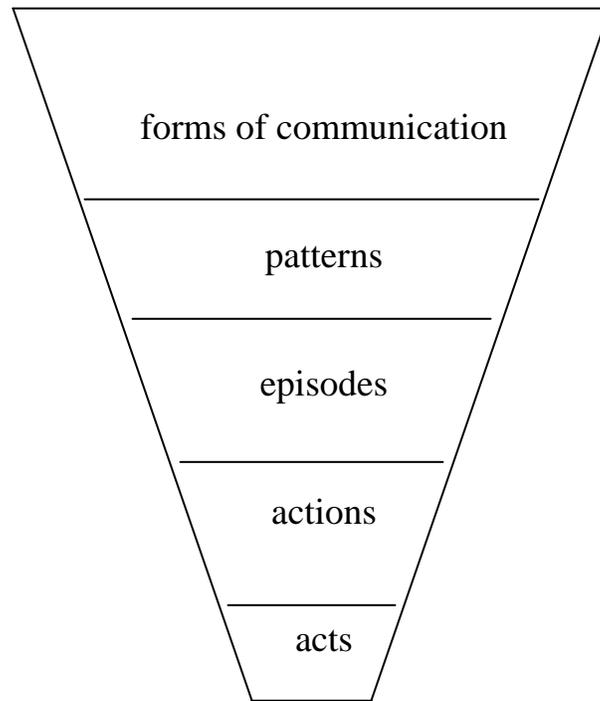


Figure 3. A vocabulary for naming various temporally extended units of communication

An *act* is a single utterance, such as "don't do that again!" from the thought experiment above.

An *action* is part of a conversational triplet (Pearce, 1994, p. 121): an act in the context of a previous act and a subsequent one. This is what is commonly referred to as a "speech act" (Pearce, 1994, pp. 102-151) and is, in my opinion, the smallest meaningful unit of conversation.

An *episode* is an action or sequence of actions that is storied; that is, it has a beginning, middle and end, with a plot-line. Episodes are what we name when asked "what are you doing?" Examples might include "having

dinner," "attending a conference," or "presenting a paper" (Pearce, 1994, pp. 152-199).

Patterns name clusters of episodes that have what Wittgenstein (see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein/#Lan>) called family-resemblances. There are any number of resemblances to pick out, including "relationships" (those episodes that have in common the connections among certain persons; see Pearce, 1994, pp. 200-244), "selves" (those episodes that have in common the person, and perhaps the person-position taken by that person; see Pearce, 1994, pp. 246-295); and "culture" (those episodes that have in common the reciprocated recognition that the other is "like us;" see Pearce, 1994, pp. 296-335). Episodes with very different content and involving different people may have a similar pattern, such as the URP ("unwanted repetitive pattern") that researchers have found in every organization and family we've studied (Cronen, Pearce and Snavely, 1979), and "dialogic communication" that some of us are trying to create (Pearce and Pearce, 2000).

I think there are an infinite number of patterns; they are social constructions, made as we develop our ability to discern and differentiate them. Even more controversially, I think that the events and objects of our social world – me, you, the Russian State University for Humanities, this seminar, and all the rest – are "made" by perceiving and then acting on the basis of the pattern in a cluster of episodes.

Forms of communication are patterns of patterns; they are the units of observation we name when we can discern family resemblances among patterns. I've spent some time trying to discern and differentiate among forms of communication, naming them *monocultural*, *ethnocentric* (and its modern variant, *neo-traditional*), *modernistic*, and *cosmopolitan* (Pearce,

1989). The primary differences among them are whether those communicating are prepared to put their resources (stories that make the world coherent) "at risk" in any new encounter and whether they treat others "as natives" (that is, hold them accountable to the same interpretive and evaluative criteria that they would apply to their own behavior). Brown (2005) illustrates these forms of communication by means of a visit to a hypothetical trade show, where various companies are presenting themselves and their products. The following is quoted from a pre-publication draft of his book:

When we enter the conference hall, we see four different corporate exhibits. The first one, Exhibit A, has a storyboard on the back of its exhibit, which shows their growth from a small company to a large corporation. The hosts in the booth all have company sweaters and seem to have somewhat identical smiles. You can tell they are a group of true believers.

As we move to Exhibit B, we find another storyboard, but it contains not only the story of the company, but also the story of its key competitors, which, as you could guess, appear as inferior companies. There are also charts and graphs that show the superiority of their corporation over the competition. Also, the hosts have drawn a path through the exhibit so visitors will know how they should visit it. There is, after all, one right way to do things. The hosts here too are true believers, but they seem much more competitive than those in the first Exhibit.

We leave Exhibit B without agreeing to take their survey, since it seemed that the answers would be either right or wrong, and move to a larger booth, Exhibit C. It is filled with the latest gadgets. There

is not a storyboard, but instead a symbol of progress on the back wall. The hosts are busy on their laptops. You can watch a short power point presentation of their next projects. As you examine the technology on display, you overhear two of the hosts arguing over whether a faster computer is really necessary or not. Instead of getting involved in the argument, you move to the fourth booth: Exhibit D.

Exhibit D is filled with chairs in small circles, with groups of people sharing their stories and experiences in working with corporate resources. Older people are sharing their experiences with younger people, and the younger people are questioning whether things have changed. You are invited to enter the conversation and to respond to the ideas presented so far. It is hard to distinguish the hosts from the visitors, since everyone seems to be participating in the conversation, which appears to be about how to maintain continuity in the context of change.

Modernistic communication is on display at Exhibit C; monocultural and ethnocentric are depicted in Exhibits A and B, respectively. Cosmopolitan communication – at Exhibit D -- is the most complex and hence least well described form of communication.

MAKING BETTER SOCIAL WORLDS THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE VIRTUOSITY

In any single minute, literally billions of people on this planet are engaging in at least four different types of communication. What is the ratio among of these types? Is modernistic communication the majority? What would be the consequence if it were? (or were not?) The current section is

based on the judgment that these different forms of communication make social worlds of different qualities and I call for us to develop our ability to discern, differentiate, and selectively call into being particular patterns of communication.

In his example of the trade show, Brown (2005) noted that the various forms of communication have different abilities to recognize and respond to personal or cultural differences and to interpersonal or institutional disagreements. Again quoting from a pre-publication version of his book:

Of the four types, monocultural communicators would have the most difficulty in even recognizing differences. Since monoculturalists recognize others as “natives,” they would see others as just like them. From the perspective that everyone is essentially similar, they would see disagreement as a lack of training or common sense. In monocultural settings, you either “get it” or you don’t.

Ethnocentric communicators take a quite different view. They would see always differences as disagreements, and therefore as a confirmation of their stories of “us” and “them.” They would also tend to think in “either–or” terms. “They” are either with us or against us. Disagreement for them initiates a win/lose contest that motivates them to protect their resources. Disagreements, in other words, appear as conflicts between right and wrong, and since most differences also become interpreted as disagreements, differences are also seen as “right or wrong.”

Modernist communicators or modernists do acknowledge the value of differences as differences, and they would respond with enthusiasm, especially if the difference represented something “new” to them; at least until its “newness” wears off. Something like the

consummate consumer, they tend to devour everything new and then move on to the next experience. They would see disagreement as distinct from differences. Modernists would see disagreements as either problems to be solved or as challenges to find a synthesis between opposing views. Given their interest in progress and the new, they would tend to discount disagreements if they were seen as barriers to innovation and future projects.

The fourth communicative type, the cosmopolitan communicator, recognizes others as different and similar. Others are different in that they have their own resources. They are similar in that their resources provide similar functions for them as ours do for us. They would see disagreement as an opportunity for learning of different ways of constructing reality, and would interpret them as resources as long as they did not completely block coordination. Disagreements about what should be done would be seen as dilemmas where two views of what is right would clash. In such cases, they would explore the background of the different views and try to increase their knowledge to see which “right” might be more appropriate, or if there might be a third way of resolving the conflict.

Brown summarizes the way differences and disagreements are treated in each of the four patterns of communication in Figure 4. If we believe that the way we communicate makes the social world in which we live, and that these forms of communication make different social worlds, then it follows that, if we are to accept our responsibility for making the kind of social world in which we want to live and which we want to bequeath to our

grandchildren, we should develop our ability to discern, differentiate, and selectively call into being preferred forms of communication.

	<i>Treatment of Others</i>	<i>Treatment of Resources</i>	<i>Treatment of Differences</i>	<i>Treatment of Disagreements</i>
<i>Monocultural Communicators</i>	As natives	Protects them	Ignores	Lack of common sense
<i>Ethnocentric Communicators</i>	As non-natives	Protects them	Combats	Right vs. Wrong
<i>Modernistic Communicators</i>	As non-natives	Puts them at Risk	Uses	Discounts
<i>Cosmopolitan Communicators</i>	As natives and non-natives	Protects and risks them	Recognizes	Right vs. Right

Figure 4. How differences and disagreements are treated in four forms of communication
(from Brown, 2005)

One name for this ability might be "communicative virtuosity." "Virtuosity" is what results when people follow their passions to know something well and to perform skillfully. Although it is typically associated with the performing arts, there are virtuosos in every form of human endeavor. Take, for example, seasoned mariners who read tide tables and weather reports with an intensity that those who have never reefed a mainsail in a storm might fail to appreciate. Being able to read the water to prepare for a header, interpret symbols on a navigation chart and follow the guidance of buoys and lights are aspects of a sailor's virtuosity that one would want with white water ahead.

Virtuosity in any field combines at least three things: (a) a "grand passion" for what you are doing, whether sailing, cooking, enjoying fine wines, learning the etymology of a word, playing chess or bridge; (b) an ability to make perspicacious distinctions (e.g., when sailing, knowing the differences among tacking, jibing, falling off, and heading up); and (c) the ability to engage in skilled performance (e.g., actually being able to tack, jibe, fall off, head up, stand on course, chart a course, and pick up a mooring). If we are to make better social worlds, this is the kind of virtuosity that is called for.

Let's consider communicative virtuosity – and its absence – in the specific case of politics in the United States. Those who vote (about 60% of those eligible) are nearly equally split in any national election. Those favoring one side or the other are geographically clustered into what are called "red" and "blue" states (because that is how they are depicted during televised coverage of election results). The distinction between reds and blues, however, is not as simple as it appears on televised national maps. In terms of what they want and support, reds and blues are not that far apart; Fiorina's (2005) study led him to conclude that the idea that America is polarized is a myth. And yet, reds and blues find it difficult to talk to each other about important national issues. When they try, they often push each other toward more extreme positions and wind up in a reciprocated snarling contest that linguist Deborah Tannen (1998) called "the argument culture."

This situation is striking for two reasons. First, it wasn't supposed to happen. Those who wrote the Constitution for the United States were deeply enmeshed in the modernistic ideas of individualism, rationality, and progress. Public discourse was supposed to occur in the "free marketplace of ideas" and, if everyone were allowed to speak freely, the discussions would

lead to truth and consensus. They valued, and expected, modernistic communication.

However, we've known for a long time that this noble vision doesn't quite work. In 1947, the Hutchins Commission's report *A Free and Responsible Press* that noted several factors subvert rational decision-making in democratic publics (see Bates, n.d.). In recent elections, political parties have practically abandoned the effort to persuade those who disagree with them in favor of more sophisticated processes of getting those who already agree with them to the polls and making sure that their votes are counted.

Second, the level of incivility is preventing government from working as it should. In the congressional elections in the middle of President Clinton's first term in office, an unprecedented number of very conservative congressmen were elected to the House of Representatives. They had campaigned on a "Contract with America" in which they promised to enact 8 reforms on the first day of the new Congress and to introduce 10 bills advancing the conservative cause within the first 100 days of the new Congress. Once elected, they acted with unusual incivility toward others, using their numerical advantage to push aside the interests and commitments of other lawmakers. They publicly reveled in their ability to thwart the desires of those who opposed them, seeing in it "just revenge" for the way they had been treated when they were in the minority. Instead of a new era, however, the result was stalemate.

Concerned, House leaders invited Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, to study their discourse; she found that the level of civility in the first session of the 104th Congress was at the lowest point in recent history. In an attempt to improve the ability of

legislators to work together, Members of the House and their families participated in a series of “civility retreats” at Hershey, Pennsylvania, coordinated by the Aspen Institute and sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The purpose of the retreats were “to seek a greater degree of civility, mutual respect, and, when possible, bipartisanship among the Members of the House of Representatives, in order to foster an environment in which vigorous debate and mutual respect can coexist” (Jamieson, 2001, p. 4).

Were these efforts successful? The answer to that question is a counterfactual; we will never know what would have happened if these meetings had not taken place. However, it is clear to those of us who live in the United States at this moment that, despite the good intentions, the problem persists.

I believe that we have sufficient evidence of the limitations of modernistic communication for doing the work of democracy, and I don't think an intervention at the level of “acts” – reducing the number of uncivil utterances – is likely to do a great deal of good. A change in the pattern or form of communication might be more successful. But who knows how to pull that off? If we knew how, who has the leverage? And if we knew how and had the leverage, how could we write the proposal in such a way that the people who have to agree to allow us to try would be able to understand it?

I have fantasies about proposing to all of our governments that they set aside a large proportion of their national budgets for the promotion of cosmopolitan communication, but I have few illusions about the success of such proposals. This is another way of saying that “communicative virtuosity” is insufficiently developed at the highest levels of government. But if we and they can develop a greater ability to recognize and take

responsibility for what we are making by communicating the way we do, then there is hope for a better world.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I've offered a vocabulary for perceiving communication in units of greater and lesser temporal extension, and for discerning among forms of communication. I'm much more committed to the task of developing communicative virtuosity than I am to defending any of these vocabularies, and much more interested in making a better social world than in being "right" about the communication theory that helps us achieve it.

Let's consider the possible responses that you might make to the suggestions I've made about taking a communication perspective, about the limitations and power of modernistic communication, about the need to talk about communication in terms of cycles, periodicity, and symmetry, and about the value of using units of observation that have longer duration. If we engaged in ethnocentric communication, you would most likely reject my suggestion as alien or foreign, perhaps as being too "American" or – even worse! – too "Californian" to be useful to you. I would reply by pointing out the superiority of my form of life and the limitations imposed on you by yours; you would respond by doing the same to me. After only a few "turns" in this conversation, we would have forgotten all about temporal extension and forms of communication as we focused on what you and I lack as persons and as communication theorists. We might even become enemies (stranger things have happened, even among scholars).

If we engaged in modernistic communication, you would take my suggestions as "not new" and set out to replace them with a better set; I might defend them by showing that your suggestions are wrong; you would

reply in the same manner, and we would, together, make a social world characterized by debate and controversy. We might even grow to dislike each other (stranger things have happened, even among scholars).

However, if we engaged in cosmopolitan communication, you would take my suggestions as one set of possibilities and develop another set, perhaps arguing that your suggestions work better in a particular context than mine. We would work together to explore the contexts in which my suggestions and your suggestions best fit, and perhaps generate a third or fourth set of terms, indicating which seems most useful for what contexts. We might even become friends and colleagues (stranger things have happened, even among scholars).

As the examples in the previous paragraphs show, the form in which we communicate creates different social worlds, enabling different selves and constructing different relationships. Communicative virtuosity is little more than being able to make such discernments and differentiations in the momentary give-and-take of ordinary social life. And if we were to accept responsibility for the forms of communication in which we engage, and set ourselves to promote cosmopolitan communication, we would be able to live in and bequeath to our grandchildren, a better social world.

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