

3.2 Media and Meaning

Aim

- To understand the importance of the medium and the intrinsic or extrinsic nature of meaning.
- To understand the development of communication.

Procedure

Distribute the following and ask the students to respond to these statements:
How would you communicate in the following situations?

- I have had a fight with a friend and I now want to forgive and begin anew...
- I am the owner of a new company that specialises in manufacturing decorative lighting...
- I am going for a birthday party of my four-year-old nephew and I want to shower him with affection...
- I disagree with the views expressed in a popular magazine...
- I dislike the constant interruption of my wife in our conversation...
- I have three dogs in my house and I want strangers and robbers to know...
- I am looking for a wife who is fair, pretty, and hard working...
- I am in-charge of the school scouts and guides movement and I want to give them a sense of pride and belonging...
- I want to tell my neighbourhood that we should take greater care of how we dispose our waste...
- I am angry with myself...

What are the media used in the above 10 instances? Can you identify them?

or

- Invite a volunteer to the front of the class. Ask him/her to show the class directions to a well-known spot in the area (e.g. a bus station, restaurant, cinema, etc.) Before doing this, ask him/her to tie their hands behind their back.
- Invariably, they will have to use their eyes or the movement of their heads to communicate the directions or extra words (“turn right, at the sign post turn left, then right again”).
- Ask the class what they thought was the main objective of the exercise. Stress the importance of the body as the primary medium through which communication takes place. See input below.

Input

- In each of the above instances we communicate through a medium (except in case no. 10 where we may restrict our self-communication only to a thought).
- The media used are of various kinds. Some of them, in themselves express meaning; others are given meaning. The first category has meaning intrinsically; the second has meaning extrinsically.

1. Media with Meaning as an Intrinsic Component

- The body:** The way we communicate is always in and through our embodiment. We have our body but we are not our body. We are spirit-in-matter or embodied spirits and we communicate as such – always through ‘matter’ and, at best, giving matter ‘spirit’. The first we call materialisation/symbolisation (visualisation); the second we call spiritualization/abstraction (inspiration). Thus as embodied spirits, the only way we can communicate as humans is through symbols, the body being the primary symbol. All symbols used in communication are but extensions of the body.
- A symbol:** The function of a symbol is to evoke or to reveal. (A dynamic factor that contains in some way the reality that is symbolised.) Joseph Goetz says “The symbol’s function is to be present itself so as to render present something other than itself.” For symbols to be understood one requires more specific knowledge of the background or context. Affectivity is the key to the power of the symbol.
- Language:** spoken and written. Signs with syntax, semantics, phonetics, etc. all express meaning
- An analogy:** is a straightforward relationship between two terms – one an analogy of the other – easy external comparisons.

Materials Required

- The list of statements photocopied for each student.

- **An idol:** when that which is symbolised is encapsulated within the alleged symbol. The symbol apprehends the symbolised. The idol traps it within its limited confines. Thus an idol is pretentious, a symbol is more modest. “Idols must die so that symbols can live.” Fanaticism is misguided fidelity which is idolatry. When dogmas are viewed as the end-term and exhaustive expression of experience, rather than the starting point and guidelines of a journey, then dogmas become idols.
- **A story** could be historical and therefore true or a fable and therefore invented.
- **Myth** is an elaborated symbol. It is a symbolic story. It is sacred, exemplary and suggests guidelines for a lifestyle. Myths are viable – realisable as meaningfully fulfilling ways of life. They are capable of developing a system of meaning.
- **Rite** is an elaborated symbol. It is a symbolic action.

2. Media with Meaning as Extrinsic:

- **A sign** is a pointer. It manifests something other than itself. Its function is indicative. (A static referential, conceptual link with a thing signified).
- **Materials:** used to convey messages like air, water, paper, pen and colour.
- **Print:** Newspapers, Magazines, Advertisements.
- **Electrical parts:** lights, current, etc.
- **Electronic media:** phone, radio, TV,
- **Satellite facilities:** e-mail, internet, e-commerce...

3. The Medium is the Message:

- The division of media with meaning as intrinsic or extrinsic is not always easy to make. What is important to note is the correlation between meaning and medium. Marshall McLuhan, a media theorist of great fame asserts, “All media are extensions of some human faculty – physical or psychic. The wheel is an extension of the foot. The book is an extension of the eye. Clothing is an extension of the skin. The electric circuitry is an extension of the central nervous system”. In this sense, all media are essentially linked to meaning.
- In this connection, McLuhan’s oft-repeated adage, “The Medium is the Message” merely means that the personal and social consequences of any medium results from the new scale that is introduced into society by any extension of ourselves or by any new technology. Ideas no longer rule the world. It is the medium – any extension of ourselves or any new technology – that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.
- McLuhan believes that any medium will affect the society it becomes a part of.
- Thus the medium shapes and controls the scale and form of how many beings associate and act not by the mere information that it disseminates, but more by the total imposing ‘effect’ it has on the receiver. Societies have also been shaped more by the nature of the ‘medium’ than by the ‘message’ (content) of the communication.
- Today, as the medium of satellite transmission increases and improves, the world is being transformed into a living room, where people from different parts of the world can chat across cyber space and exchange ideas, images and money at the click of a button. All this has transformed behaviour, life-style, way of thinking, global finance and industry. Once again, McLuhan has been proved correct. The medium has determined the shape, size and content of the message – not the other way round.

4. Means of Communication

Historically, authors like Innis, Ong and McLuhan see the development of communication in three stages while Michael Prosser adds a fourth stage

- * Oral-aural communication
- * Script communication
- * Electronic communication
- * Space and satellite communication

While it is certainly important to know the different stages of the development of communication and the means by which they are employed, it is necessary to guard against the risk of assuming that the means, particular to a given stage of development are limited and specific to that stage. This does not mean that they are not or may not be employed in the other stages.

Review

1. Some media in themselves express meaning while others are given meaning. The first category has meaning intrinsically; the second has meaning extrinsically.
2. The way we communicate is always in and through our embodiment.
3. The function of a symbol is to evoke or to reveal.
4. A sign is a pointer. It manifests something other than itself.
5. All media are extensions of some human faculty – physical or psychic.
6. Societies have been shaped more by the nature of the ‘medium’ by which one communicates than by the ‘message’ (content) of the communication.
7. The development stages of communication are: Oral-aural communication, Script communication, Electronic communication and Space and satellite communication.
8. On this note also, it is necessary to guard against the risk of assuming that the means, particular to a given stage of development are limited and specific to that stage.



Reflection

Modern means of communication are very powerful and are spreading to all corners of the world. However, in the greater part of Africa which is still rural, this is not so. Reflect on ways that one can evangelise to these parts of Africa using a blend of the traditional and modern means of communication.

Relevant Skills

For a period of 30 min, sit in your college compound or an office reception at your College and observe the unspoken communication rules practiced. Present your observations to your fellow participants and allow them to compare these observations with how they themselves communicate.

Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA. 'SHEPHERDS' FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini, 2000.

References

Social Communication Departments AMECEA and IMBISA. Communication, Culture and Community. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1999.