

## TRANSMISSION, COMMUNION, COMMUNICATION

James Carey — *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*

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Carey, James W.  
*Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*  
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### Abstract

*Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* is a classic text from the American school of communication. It was republished in 2009 by Routledge on the occasion of the author's death. This new edition includes a critical foreword by G. Stuart Adam that explains Carey's fundamental role in the establishment of communication studies in America, particularly against the American tradition of focusing only on mass communication's function as a means of social and political control. Carey maintains that communication is not merely the transmission of information; reminding the reader of the link between the words "communication" and "community". The collection of essays presented in this volume furnishes an important debate on the concept of communication, which at times favors the transmission of signs, and at times favors the sharing of common experiences or the synthesis of information.

**Keywords:** Communication; Information; Communion; Transmission; Culture

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*Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* is a classic text in American media studies. Originally published by Unwin Hyman in 1989, the book was revised in 2009 as a tribute to James Carey, who died in 2006. The author was a professor at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, where he founded the university's Ph.D. program in Communication. James Carey is also responsible for bringing the work of Canadian scholars Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, whose works would later on ground the media studies in English speaking countries, to the attention of American media scholars. In particular, Carey introduced the work of Harold Innis, who he pays homage to in what is arguably the most important essay in the book: Space, Time and Communications.

This new edition includes a complete bibliography of all of Carey's writings and a critical foreword by G. Stuart Adam, a Professor Emeritus at Carleton University who studied under the supervision of Carey. This introduction explains Carey's fundamental role in transforming the study of mass communication to include a cultural perspective, and it connects Carey's classic essays with contemporary media issues and trends. James W. Carey maintained that communication is not merely the transmission of information; an approach that questions the American tradition of focusing only on mass communication's function as a means of social and political control, and makes a case for broadening the definition of communication to include an investigation into the content of a communication — the meaning of symbols, not only the motives behind them or the purposes they serve.

Even though Carey is not a dedicated theoretician, nor have his essays become widely known outside the field of media studies, this collection of writings brings a few interesting insights into the cluttered conceptual framework of communication research. Replacing the search for deterministic laws of behavior and acknowledging that *communication is not some pure phenomenon we can discover; there is no such thing as communication to be revealed in nature through some objective method free from the corruption of culture* (Carey 2009:24), Carey connects communication and culture through a ritual view of communication. Contrasting the extension of messages in space and the maintenance of shared beliefs in time, Carey brings together the concepts of commonness, communion, community and communication.

Therefore, Carey's major thesis is based upon two communication metaphors. The first one, a space-based metaphor, perceives communication as transportation, the participant roles as

sender/receiver, the role of meaning as sending/receiving and defines the communication event in view of the accuracy of transmission. The second one, a time-based metaphor, perceives communication as ceremony, the participant roles as participants, the role of meaning as creation/recreation, and identifies the communication event as a shared experience. Although American media studies bears a strong resemblance to cultural studies, Carey rejects the work of Stuart Hall because he perceives this work as also being derived from a commitment to the transmission view of communication. For Carey, communication is rooted in time and history, and communication scholars should go elsewhere into biology, theology, anthropology, and literature for some intellectual material to escape the treadmill that has dominated the academic view of communication, expressed in behavioral and functional terms (Carey 2009:18).

As a result, Carey's thesis sustains that communication is not just the act of imparting information, but also the representation of shared beliefs and common experiences. James Carey claims these two alternative conceptions of communication have been alive in American culture since this term entered the common discourse in the nineteenth century. Both definitions derive from religious origins, though they refer to somewhat different regions of religious experiences. On the one hand, there was the act of transmission. On the other hand, there was the ritual of communion. The transmission view of communication, which prevailed in all industrial societies, depicts communication by terms such as imparting, sending and transmitting. This image of communication was formed from a metaphor of geography or transportation that mirrors the movement of goods or people. In the nineteenth century, the movement of goods, people and information were seen as basically identical processes and both were described using the same noun "communication."

Materiality and information, thus, were unified under the aegis of communication, understood as the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control, a powerful image that rendered the dreams of increasing the speed and the effect of messages as they travel in space. This twofold deviation of the concept of communication is also found in the linguistic legacy of the Portuguese word, as the Latin term *communicatio* refers both to the end of a seclusion and the social experience — the action of enlarging the human conversation by comprehending what others are saying. Even the *Vocabulário Português e Latino*, whose 16 volumes were originally published between 1712 and 1728, already registered the definition of rhetorical communication, by words or assets, and social communication, among persons and groups. Additionally, the first Portuguese dictionary also defined communication as the action of

imparting knowledge or thoughts. As a result, communication ever since has implied, on the one hand, the idea of sharing and distribution of something among people: one that sends and another that receives. On the other hand, it implied the idea of transmission, the imparting of information or knowledge. Both meanings were available and expressed by the Portuguese and Latin word “comunicação.”

Therefore, the theoretical oscillation of the idea of communication was not a conceptual finding of James Carey. In fact, such bipolar behavior has been revived in a great deal of later debates that focus either on a closed outline to the communication mechanisms, hence favoring the transmission of signals, or on an open image towards the communication phenomenon, hence favoring the sharing of experiences or the synthesis of information. Whereas functionalist and cybernetic theories support a somewhat operationally closed approach to comprise the transmission and the circular aspects of communication, reception studies and phenomenology theories support open structures and the breakout of systems as enduring communication events. Media studies managed to assemble, as an outcome of the very resilience of the concept, these two epistemological perspectives — notwithstanding the lack of further discussion on this topic.

However, Carey’s contribution to communication and media studies is a methodological rather than a theoretical one. The American media critic succeeded in rendering two research programs that converge with respect to the same object. Journalism, for instance, would be an object of research that goes through these two communicative dimensions. According to Carey, it is possible to examine a newspaper both under a ritual view of communication, in which the reading of a newspaper strengthens a particular view of the world, and under the transmission view of communication, in which one sees the medium as an instrument for disseminating news and knowledge in larger and larger packages over greater distances.

If one examines a newspaper under a transmission view of communication, one sees the medium as an instrument for disseminating news and knowledge, sometimes *divertissement*, in larger and larger packages over greater distances. Questions arise as to the effects of this on audiences: news as enlightening or obscuring reality, as changing or hardening attitudes, as breeding credibility or doubt. Questions also are raised concerning the functions of news and the newspaper: Does it maintain the integration of society or its maladaptation? Does it function or malfunction to maintain stability or promote the instability of personalities? Some such mechanical analysis normally accompanies a “transmission” argument (Carey 2009:16).

A ritual view of communication will focus on a different range of problems in examining a newspaper. It will, for example, view reading a newspaper less as sending or gaining information and more as attending a mass, a

situation in which nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed. News reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information—but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world. Moreover, as readers make their way through the paper, they engage in a continual shift of roles or of dramatic focus. (...) Under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it (Carey 2009:16-17).

Carey's methodological program is tested within his original analysis of the telegraph, which has reportedly dislodged the face-to-face contact of daily business. The American scholar goes through the history of the telegraph to shed some light onto the social and commercial changes that this medium brought. The metaphor of communication as the transmission of messages is first presented in an earlier stage of development, seeing that the telegraph positively accounts for the initial separation between communication and the material transportation of messages, thus reorganizing the space/time functions and its social and ideological effects. Because the telegraph separates communication from information, messages could be transmitted faster than the physical constraints related to delivery by persons, trains or horses. The telegraph, consequently, *not only allowed messages to be separated from the physical movement of objects, it also allowed communication to actively control physical processes* (Carey 2009:157).

Social and economic experiences were thus reshaped by the reconfiguration of the space-time coordinates introduced by the telegraph. Carey argues this system for message transmission makes geography irrelevant for communication, as it allows symbols to move independently of and faster than physical entities (Carey 2009:165). This early reconfiguration made it possible for communication to exceed domestic space towards national coverage at first, followed by international and global contexts thereafter. Allowing nearly instantaneous communication between people from one side of the planet and people on the other side of the planet, the telegraph left its imprint in language and literary style, which immediately reorganized with an emphasis on conciseness and clarity. Due to the operational expanses related to each transmitted character, the prose became snappy and tighter, aiming toward a lean but terse simplicity. The telegraphic style condensed writing by omitting articles and pronouns — seen as adornments — and also separated the connection between the reader and the author. Humor, colloquialism and idiosyncrasies were left behind for the benefit of objectivity and balance, so that the text could be understood by people from very different backgrounds and perspectives.

# MATRIZes

The essays of James Carey presented in this book cast some light upon the decisive edges of the concept of communication. This aporia is depicted, on the one hand, by the relationship between the telegraph and the railroad, which illustrates the basic notion of systems theory about integrated switched systems and, on the other hand, by the relationship between readers and news reading, which illustrates a framework of integrated and shared beliefs. This theoretical polarization is reinforced when communication research stresses either a closed outline to the communication process or an open representation in regard to the communication experience. This debate revolved around French poststructuralist discourse-analysis and an associated critique of structuralism, as well as around postwar German theory, particularly during the 1960s, by sociologists Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, whose concepts of communication are the antithesis of each other. In a way, these two schools of thought reveal the fundamental divergence between different epistemological matrices to conceive communication. If James Carey's book does not settle the issue, it nevertheless helps to address the inconsistencies in the concept of communication.

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