Communication as... Perspectives on Theory

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Communication as Techné

Jonathan Sterne

D efore communication is intersubjective connection, coordination, ritual, meaning, culture, or anything else, communication is something that people do. At its core, communication is a special form of action. To use an antiquated phrase, it is a practical art, or rather a set of practical arts. This holds true no matter what favorite example we use for that massive and ambiguous thing we call communication: it is true in conversation, in large-scale media systems, in human-animal interaction, and in the most subtle dimensions of encounters with others. Communication is, above all else, a techné. In this chapter, I will outline what I mean by techné and then offer brief historical, political, and philosophical arguments for its use as a defining metaphor for communication. Techné is a Greek word, and it is addressed in the writings of many of the ancient Greek thinkers. To be fair, the word's connotation is somewhat ambiguous depending on whom you read and which text you choose (see, e.g., Parry, 1993). Hence, I will offer my preferred reading of the term, which is not to be mistaken with the single, historically correct definition. I want to argue about communication, not my interpretation of the ancient Greeks.

Aristotle most famously designated techné as practical art and practical knowledge. For him, techné meant both the process of producing things in the world (crafts, for instance) and the capacity or knowledge of contingency—practical knowledge—that allows and accounts for that production

Many thanks to Carrie Rentschler and Ted Striphas for their suggestions on this essay.

(Aristotle, 1962, Book VI, Ch. 3-4). As Heidegger wrote of this section in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, techné "reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie before us, whatever can look and turn out now one way and now another" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 13). Creation and contingency are central to how we should understand techné. A simple example would be a musician's "technique," which describes the practical sense that she brings to her instrument and the actual process through which she plays it. A musician's technique encompasses both her actual movements and the practical, embodied knowledge she brings to the instrument.

Several things should be apparent from this definition and example. First, techné is embodied knowledge, not formal or logical knowledge. Techné is meant to be distinguished from abstract knowledge, which Aristotle called epistêmê. Epistêmê designates the realm of formal theory, scientific knowledge, of facts and ideas. So, to extend the musician metaphor, the ability to play a song that rocks or to perform a masterful interpretation of Bach's cello etudes is a form of techné, because it demonstrates the unfolding of a sensibility. To be sure, this sensibility is cultured. As countless ethnomusicologists have shown, the most basic ideas of "in tune" or "in rhythm" vary from culture to culture. At the same time, a musician's technique is also an irreducibly personal, embodied sense of what it means to make music. Thus, techné bridges the chasm between possibility and actuality: it indexes both what the musician actually does and what she or he might do, or even what she or he is capable of doing or willing to do. Techné refers both to action and the conditions of possibility for action.

Conversely, the ability to name from memory all the flats in the key of G-flat is a form of epistêmê, as is an encyclopedic knowledge of the names and instruments of all the backup musicians who played with your favorite jazz soloist. Formal knowledge is also cultured, but it is knowledge that requires thought, memory, formal learning, action, or recollection. Epistêmê has no necessary connection to what one does or can do. It is knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The object and purpose of epistêmê are different from those of techné: the former is knowing about, the latter is embodied knowledge.

Techné has, in our time, given way to two terms that designate some of the most important aspects of communication: technique and technology. Both terms share with techné an ambiguity between the actual and the possible and the dual connotation of practical knowledge and practical acts. To consider communication as a technique or learned skill is uncontroversial. To use phrases like "good communicator" or "knack for getting her point across" implies that communication is an art about which people gain practical knowledge. In the domains of arts and media, this is even more clear. Language used to describe the work of a writer, an artist, a songwriter, or, for that matter, a chef, or someone who makes perfume, is often the

language of skill, sense, and facility. But techné goes further than this, for it designates not only the skills of people who we might say have special talents, but rather the talents and styles of communication embodied in each person. The subtle gestures of casual conversation, the split-second decision of whether to meet a stranger's eyes on the street, the inflections of the voice-hundreds of different techniques of empathy and avoidance, closeness and distance—are in use at every moment of every day.

"One might say that arms and legs are full of numb imperatives," writes sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990, p. 69). He argues that social life is built up from "practical logics" that do not necessarily follow the rules of formal reason but rather have a logic of their own. For example, "a man who raises his hat in greeting is unwittingly reactivating a conventional sign inherited from the Middle Ages, when, as Panofsky reminds us, armed men used to take off their helmets to make clear their peaceful intentions" (Bourdieu, 1981, p. 305). If we meet and I tip my hat as a greeting, it is not because I wish to indicate that I do not plan to kill you. It is simply out of habit, a technique of greeting. In this way, a tip of the hat exists as a sort of unthought, unconsidered "second nature." It is something people "just do." But this habit has a history and a social valence, as do all such gestures and habits. All this is to suggest that although the techné of communication is intensely personal and stylized, it is also intensely social. Scholars of interpersonal communication who examine distance and comportment in bodily action have made this point repeatedly, as has Erving Goffman (1963), who famously demonstrated that while norms and stigmas are intensely social, it is up to each individual to negotiate them effectively and creatively.

All this is well and good, but why use techné as a driving metaphor for communication in general? Techné has descriptive and political benefits for those of us who wish to develop an account of communication as a social phenomenon. Descriptively, an approach to communication as techné demands that we examine what people actually do when they are communicating—not what they say they are doing or what they think they are doing, but what they do. Here we return to Bourdieu and his notion of practical logic. In casual conversation, each gesture or turn of phrase is not consciously willed or considered. Rather, it comes out of a repertoire or sensibility developed by the people involved. If a musician had to think before each movement on an instrument, or, for that matter, if I had to think before each press of a key on this keyboard, we never would get anything done. Because the sensibility is embodied, and superficially spontaneous (that is, spontaneous after lots of practice), it does not necessarily conform to the rules of logic or the protocols of reason. In most examples of communication, the "communicative" part consists of actions taken by people or machines located in some kind of social network. The mechanical action is obviously unconscious and habitual, but so are much

of people's actions. This is true whether we are talking about radio listening, movie making, or conversation. Personal action, thus, is tied inextricably to larger social sensibilities and relations; we must account for apparently spontaneous action as coming out of learned repertoires of possibility.

Indeed, it is the question of possibility that has so animated 19th- and 20th-century philosophers of interest to communication theorists. Marx's famous adage that people make history but in conditions not of their own making perfectly captures the relationship between possibility and concrete action in techné. Bourdieu's notion of habitus, the "nonspontaneous principle of spontaneity" (1990, p. 56), attempts to explain how apparently spontaneous action is rooted in learned, embodied social tendencies. Michel Foucault's notion of a "diagram" of social relations that makes possible the interactions in a prison, a school, or a confessional similarly partakes of Aristotle's useful ambiguity between an event and its possibility in techné (for a full discussion, see Deleuze, 1988; Foucault, 1977, 1991). Though they approach the question very differently, both Bourdieu and Foucault situate actual events within a broader terrain of conditions of possibility. To use a somewhat prosaic metaphor, they are both interested in the rules of the social game. Both sides of the language debate in linguistics also partake of the social question animated by techné. A sense of concrete action rooted in a range of embodied possibilities animates both Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf's hypothesis that language makes possible understanding and Noam Chomsky's notion of a "generative grammar" that exists in people's minds prior to the acquisition of language (Chomsky, 2004; Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956). Both theories treat language as a techné, an art that produces something in the world and requires a practical sense (the debate, of course, is over the origin of that practical sense).

A concept of communication as techné also requires us to rethink the relationships we posit between bodies and technologies. Modern media are vast aggregates or assemblages of techniques, institutions, and technologies. Machines and technological systems are an extension of the logic of possibility, practical knowledge, and realized action hidden in techné because they are essentially crystallized sets of repeatable activities and relationships. Though the word *technology* has been around since the Middle Ages to refer to a treatise on practical arts, it came to mean "the practical arts, collectively" in 19th-century usage (Oxford English Dictionary, "technology," s.v.). Communication technologies are nothing more and nothing less than collectivized, amalgamated, and routinized techniques of communication.

Bruno Latour's famous example of the door-closer illustrates this well. Here, a whole set of social relations, practices, and assumptions are crystallized in the device to keep a door closed at the entrance to a sociology department. There are many reasons to keep a door closed: to separate inside and outside; to control passages, people, and noise; to demarcate space symbolically;

to control temperature; and so forth. There are also many ways to keep a door closed. The door-closer thus reinforces these structured tendencies and habits, even as it acts independently of people once it is built and set up, simply closing the door each time it is opened. When the door-closer works, it disappears from consciousness. Its function is forgotten. When the door-closer does not work the way it is supposed to, it has all sorts of new social significance, simply by virtue of closing the door a little too quickly (and batting passersby on the behind) or too slowly (Latour, 1988). Technologies, thus, are associated with habits and practices, sometimes crystallizing them, sometimes promoting them, and sometimes fighting them. They are structured by human practices so that they may, in turn, structure human practices. Technologies are crystallized bits of practical art and practical reason—they are techniques externalized and delegated to machines.

Often, these functions could be performed by people or machines. Whether we are talking about a person responsible for closing a door or a spring-loaded gadget, a door-closer controls the physical communication of bodies between a room and a hallway. Other technologies (and if you think about it, all modern technologies are really technological systems) ossify techniques of communication in other ways. On a simple level, people use cameras to see for them; telephones, microphones, and magnetic pickups to hear for them; speakers to sing, speak, and serenade for them; and electric lights to supplement their limited powers of sight. In some cases, a word encompasses both people and machines. An interesting contemporary example is *computer*. Computers were once individuals or groups of people employed to make calculations. Now the term applies to general-purpose calculating machines.

Even more complex media are basically large groups of related techniques, combined together in institutional form. The construct of television or radio as broadcasting, for instance, requires that we conceive of the production and consumption of broadcast material in certain ways. On the production and distribution end, a broadcast medium requires a massive infrastructure of institutions, people, and technologies, all of which undertake routine, repetitive action. Broadcasting is techné on a massive scale: from the skills and cultivated instincts of the engineers at the station; to the ways in which cables, switches, and satellites direct signals; to the ways in which these technologies implement corporate or national policies. On the consumption end, people employ countless techniques of listening to experience "radio," as we know it, and the same can be said for spectatorship and television. Publishing, public speaking, or recording all invoke related but different sets of techniques, relations, and institutions.

So communication as technology and communication as technique share the same root: communication as techné. I have suggested an analytical approach that sees both on a continuum. But conceiving of communication as techné

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also runs counter to at least one major habit of communication historians, which I call the "add technology and stir" model of communication history. Technology has not fared well in our histories of communication. The tale usually told is that before the invention of writing, communication happened as speech, inside the subject's mind and out through the subject's breath. It was ephemeral, transitory, and even magical. This "primacy of speech" thesis suggests, as did Plato in the *Phaedrus* (1961), that writing is the first true technology of communication. Indeed, a parade of communication historians have likened all other communication technologies to writing. In the primacy of speech model, we "add technology and stir" to speech to get other kinds of communication. Along with this model comes a series of laments about the alienation of modern life, the loss of community, and the decline of intersubjective recognition as humans use tools more and more to communicate with one another.

The problem here is both political and descriptive. The "add technology and stir" model is a political problem because it leads communication scholars to invoke a bizarre nostalgia, where the stark inequalities and everyday struggles for survival that characterized life in previous centuries disappears. It is not that our world today is perfect—far from it! If you are not upperclass, male, heterosexual (in many cases), able-bodied, and a member of the dominant ethnic and religious group in your region, your life chances—and the choices of what to do with your life—would have been severely diminished in any historical period prior to our own. So we should be wary of any theory or history of communication that asks us to look back to earlier periods for examples of more just, equitable, or harmonious societies.

There are additional good descriptive grounds for a model of communication with techné as its driving metaphor. Techné is at the very historical core of what it means to communicate, and, contrary to the "add technology and stir" model of communication history, techné is, in some senses, historically *prior to* the advent of human communication. If one is looking for that special something that separated our evolutionary ancestors from other animals, it would have to be humans' peculiar combination of language and tool use. Indeed, archaeologists have found evidence of painting, sculpture, and musical instruments that go "all the way back" to the origins of the human race. The earliest known sculptures, for instance, are over 35,000 years old, but archaeologists have speculated that sculpture itself goes back at least 70,000 years. If these hypotheses are correct, they trouble the model of communication that claims humans once lived in a world of communication to which technology was added. The dimensions of craft, tool, and "practical art" were there from the very beginning.

Indeed, Lewis Mumford has argued for a sense of language as techné as well. Mumford writes that there is a "vital connection between all physical

movement and speech" (1966, p. 86, emphasis in original). Speech is one technique of the body among many. But for Mumford, spoken language also is intimately related to tool use through the process of standardization, because they followed the same historical pattern. Once satisfactory forms of tools or words were reached, there is little evidence, he says, for "wanton variation" in their form. In this way, language and tool use are part of a shared human history of techné. Communication requires both language and technology—and both are forms of techné.²

It would be unfair at this point to take the pragmatist escape from essences and say that the question of what communication is should be replaced with what communication does. But communication as a practical art—as doing—should be a central concern for us. To put it another way, communication is a philosophical and political problem, because it is a practical art through which people make, break, or maintain their worlds. We should conceive of communication as techné because the most important parts of communication are precisely the unthought second natures of technique and technology. Communication as techné highlights the two most important aspects of communication today: the widespread use of technology in conjunction with other forms of interaction and the simultaneously social and habitual forms of interaction that make up modern life. If one goal of communication scholarship is to find and describe ways to live ethically and well in large-scale and diverse societies, communication as techné may be our best path there.

Notes

- 1. Bourdieu's comments quoted here appear in discussions of his concept of *habitus*, which is somewhat beyond the scope of this essay. See Sterne (2003) for a longer discussion of Bourdieu and technique.
- 2. Students of Mumford may argue that this reading goes against the grain of his project in *Myth of the Machine*, which aims to dethrone a historical narrative of technological progress with "modern" (1960s era) technology at its apex. Perhaps, but my goal is not to celebrate modern technology, but rather to identify the shared roots of language, technique, and technology in the concept of techné.

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PART III

Contextualizing