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### Victoria bushfires report: poor response cost lives

Major communication breakdowns during the deadly Black Saturday bushfires meant many people were warned too late or not at all, while emergency operators couldn't cope.

The interim report into the disaster which killed 173 people has recommended fire authorities toughen up the controversial 'stay or go' policy by spelling out to people the safest option during a fire is always to leave or risk severe injury or death.

The report by the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission ... said late or inadequate warnings had cost lives.

'For those who choose to stay and defend, the risks should be spelt out more plainly, including the risk of death,' it said.

But the report's main criticism was that lives had been lost because of inadequate or confusing warnings.

'Warnings were often delayed which meant that many people were not warned at all or the amount of time they had to respond to the warnings was much less than it should have been,' the report said.

It recommended that future advice be clear and focus on saving lives.

Warnings should include information about fire severity, location, predicted direction and the likely time of impact.

Research should also help develop a fire severity scale, similar to the cyclone categories 1-5, the interim report recommended.

Source: Draper, M., 'Victoria bushfire report: poor response cost lives', *Courier Mail*, 18 August 2009.

## INTRODUCTION

The loss of life and property during the bushfires in Victoria in February 2009 was a tragedy of communication breakdown. According to the Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission, this resulted from poor or inadequate warnings and unclear language that did not make clear the severity of the bushfire threat on the day and the potentially deadly consequences of staying to defend homes. It is a recent example of the importance of understanding the complexities of communication.

This chapter introduces communication theory, presents some definitions of communication and attempts to place communication in realistic professional and academic situations. Two models of communication are compared: transmission and transaction. Transmission emphasises the links in a communication chain, especially the source and the receiver, and compares the importance of the message itself and the medium by which it is transmitted. The transaction model gives precedence to the sharing of meaning in communication and tries to account for individual differences and the impact of social uncertainties and contexts in the process. There is some reference to cultural and gender factors in communication: these factors are further examined in later chapters.

The reader, finally, is reminded of the dimensions of communication in the personal, social and public spheres, and how they relate, overlap and sometimes have to be reconciled with each other.

## PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

The field of communication studies is large. Whole university programs relate to it. These days, communication professionals such as journalists, public relations consultants, advertising account executives, film and television practitioners and creative writers combine tertiary study of communication theory with study of their professional practice.

But other professions also rely heavily on well-developed communication skills. Nurses, medical practitioners, accountants, managers, engineers, lawyers, builders, teachers, IT specialists and librarians are only some of the professionals for whom this book has been prepared.

In describing the duties of professional people, employers invariably emphasise communication skills. Consider the advertisements for executive placements in weekend newspapers. Typically they ask for such qualities as:

- excellent communication and presentation skills
- the ability to liaise harmoniously with senior management and clients
- initiative
- team focus
- high-level oral, written and interpersonal skills
- the ability to lead and coordinate a team and liaise with specialists in other departments
- the ability to prepare proposals and submissions, etc.

That professional people need to be good communicators is, we hope, generally accepted. That professional communication competence is easy and natural, a skill you bring with you from high school or that can be picked up once in the job, is anything but true. Newspapers frequently provide stories of failed communication in business dealings caused, for example, by faulty written instructions to staff or misunderstood email briefings. Some of these failures are matters of personality clashes and deliberate conflict, but many more stem from inadequate attention to communication skills.

Communication competence is likely to vary according to the forms of communication we use in professional life. Some professionals speak better than they write; others avoid public speech-making and seek refuge in the privacy of the written report. Some thrive on interviews, discussions and meetings; others have difficulty working in teams.

## *The role of ethics in professional communication*

Questions of right and wrong arise whenever people communicate, and ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking and decision-making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across cultures, media and society more broadly. So, when thinking about communication skills, there are other important issues besides competence (the ability to write, speak and generally interact with others effectively), and they relate not only to the language of professionals but also to the ethics of communication in the professional workplace.

The definition of 'ethics' is, however, abstract, complex and sometimes problematic, but generally relates to questions of right or wrong, honesty, accuracy of information and integrity. The study of ethics is an ancient one, originating from the time of the ancient Greeks such as Socrates and Aristotle. In fact the word 'ethics' comes from a Greek word meaning 'custom' and 'character'. Ethics can be broadly defined as a set of principles of right and moral conduct but these can be socially and culturally determined.

These days, the boundaries of business ethics are usually set out in an organisation's mission statement and by codes of conduct within which most professions are supposed to act. However we often seem to hear about businesses large and small that have been caught out acting unethically and sometimes illegally. Phillip Lewis wrote in an article titled 'Defining "business ethics": like nailing jello to a wall', that 'business ethics is more than just virtue, integrity or character. It involves the application of what is morally right and truthful at a time of ethical dilemma' (1985, p. 383). In other words, it can be measured by how businesses and professionals behave and respond to challenges that arise during crises, and is a measurement of their application of ethical business behaviour.

In this book, we are interested in the ethics of professional communication. This is becoming increasingly complex with the evolution of new communication technologies, but we will discuss this more in later chapters. In general, however, while most professional associations have their own industry specific codes of ethical conduct with respect to their practice and communication (e.g. Public Relations Institute of Australia, Australian Computing Society, Certified Practising Accountants and the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance), the following is a general outline of points that should apply to communication in all professions.

### Communication code of ethics

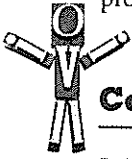
- 1 Good communication is clear. It uses language and other symbols to explain simply, to describe exactly, to persuade logically. It avoids vagueness, inaccuracy and distortion of facts.
- 2 Good communication is honest. It does not lie but presents all necessary and relevant information.
- 3 Good communication is democratic. It should not lead to disadvantage for any ethnic, gender, religious or social group in the society.
- 4 Good communication is sincere. It uses persuasion and advocacy with facts and judgements which do not, either overtly or covertly, appeal to prejudice or ignorance.
- 5 Good communication respects its audience. It makes its message clear to them in language they understand. It is thorough and balanced. It does not 'talk down to' or 'patronise' its audience.
- 6 Good communication is logical. It employs no tricks of persuasion, omissions deliberately designed to deceive, or details designed to distort or manipulate.

So how do these points affect the specific ways in which professionals communicate:

- with each other?
- with members of other professions?
- with non-professionals such as clients or the general public?

How might these differences be explained by the complexity of professional practice or by the desire to guard professional secrets? Are they explained by the need to maintain market advantage

or to mask professional uncertainties? What obligations do professionals have to their profession, their employers, their colleagues, their clients and society as a whole? Does the need to consider professional ethics impose too many restrictions on successful business practice?



### Case study 1.1 Communication ethics in the professions

Below are extracts from an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled 'Self-interest detracts from lustre of the professions' and written by Simon Longstaff, Executive Director of the St James Ethics Centre, Sydney.

... the professions are consistently understood as being made up of people who act in a spirit of public service. That is, professionals are supposed to put the interests of the community before self-interest or that of their professional colleagues ... society has agreed to enter into a kind of social compact where it allows professionals certain privileges. These include: the right to carry out certain work forbidden to others, the right to engage in self-regulation, and so on.

Far too often has society been left with no alternative but to conclude that its trust has been abused ... there are medical practitioners who have failed to respect the autonomy of their patients, lawyers who have failed to distinguish between the client's interests and wants, and accountants who have operated as 'guns for hire' on the basis that if they don't do the job, then somebody else will. Engineers have sanctioned the application of sub-standard specifications, architects have allowed the public spaces to be polluted and journalists have ignored the truth in favour of a 'good story'.

It must surely be time for a deeper debate about the purpose of the professions in society; a time to call the professions to account and give them an

opportunity to re-commit to the social compact. It is also a time for them to make serious suggestions about ways in which the community's trust can justifiably be restored.

Source: Longstaff, S., *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April 1994, p. 17.

#### Discussion

Organise a class discussion on the ethical obligations of professional communication. Refer to the points made in the case study as well as the six-point code listed above. Here are a few possible discussion starters.

- What obligations do professionals in your field have to their profession, their employers, their colleagues, their clients and society as a whole?
- Should their primary obligation be to their organisation and its shareholders in the case of a public company?
- What does Simon Longstaff mean when he talks about 'the social compact'?
- Do professionals guard their 'secrets' from the public? If so, why and how?

What are some of the effects of unclear communication for both the profession itself and the people who are its clients?

Identify, if appropriate, cases of unethical behaviour among professionals that you have experienced or may have read about. After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 25 for our comments.

The case study raises a number of issues about how professionals communicate. Have professionals a duty to make their messages clear to the public? If the language of a profession is difficult to understand, for example in law or medicine, is this because professionals deliberately guard their secrets to draw a cloak around themselves and exclude those not in the know? If so, why might this be? Has the practice of using codes of conduct or mission statements as marketing or public relations tools led to a compartmentalisation of public and private ethics, as Cheney et al. (2010) have suggested? Do some organisations use their mission statements as a public relations exercise but fail to adhere to their principles? In his 2009 book *Bendable Learnings*, Australian writer and academic Don Watson cites the following example of a mission statement where there is an obvious disconnect between the stated values of the company and its corporate behaviour. The company in question is Blackwater, the US State Department's biggest supplier of arms and ammunition, and 'has been the



negotiate a closer understanding. Perhaps we never agree on the meaning of a concept or idea, but we may have narrowed the gap between us. Meaning relates to *context* or the setting in which meaning is generated. So time, place, emotional atmosphere and culture can all affect meaning.

4 *Communication is the sharing of meaning through information, ideas and feelings.*

Sharing implies an intention to contribute, not merely an incidental coming together or interaction (see Exhibit 1.1). This definition also tries to analyse the components of a communication. It says that meaning consists of:

- information (perception of facts such as the coming of rain during the day)
- ideas (concepts, opinions and attitudes such as commitment to a safe workplace)
- feelings (e.g. love, admiration, distrust, anger).

Thus symbolic forms like words and images may be accompanied by non-verbal expressions like laughter, frowning or angry outbursts of emotion, all adding to and complicating the search for meaning in a situation. Messages are constructed (or *encoded*) and interpreted (or *decoded*) by the individual or group.

So these four definitions of communication describe the process with different emphases. But merely defining communication does not guarantee effective communication. The capacity of people, groups, political parties, governments and nations to communicate and build constructive relationships is very limited indeed. Communication breaks down all the time and between all sorts of people, including those who are highly educated and highly articulate. Meanings differ from one person to another, even when they are looking at the same object, listening to the same speech or reading the same report. In fact it may be more appropriate to speak of narrowing the communication gap rather than achieving perfect communication between people.

### EXHIBIT 1.1 Communication as the sharing of meaning



## HOW WE USE THE WORD *COMMUNICATION*

Here are some typical uses of the words *communicate*, *communication* or *communicating*:

1 *Communication with the advance party has been cut off for four days. We're hoping they're safe.*

The phone lines are down, the mobiles are out of range, the advance party is stranded or captured. There is no contact. Technical transmission of the message has broken down. Transmission is responsible for a lot of failures in communication.

2 *I can't seem to communicate with my patient. I'm sure she's not taking the medication I prescribed last week.*

Perhaps the doctor gives her instructions too rapidly, or in highly scientific terms that the patient can't follow. Perhaps the patient is experiencing side effects from the medication that she is not communicating to the doctor. Transmission is not the problem here; the message is being delivered, but the patient has no confidence in the prescription or maybe in the doctor. There has not been enough interrelating or exchanging of information and experiences between these two.

3 *There was good communication between group members, despite our different backgrounds. In three hours we had planned a new approach to the project. Everybody was ready to back it.*

Here there is a shared aim: to cooperate. Hence there is a willingness to reveal information and diminish any differences in feelings that might have been brought to the situation. So meaning is shared, and information can be conveyed confidently and individual views are respected.

4 *I simply can't communicate with my staff any more: nobody wants to do any work!*

Perhaps this manager's information is outdated or his ideas unworkable. But more likely his feelings of superiority or contempt are transmitted unintentionally but strongly. As a result his staff decline to share meaning with him.

5 *Communication between the old and the young is as bad now as it ever was.*

Here we seem to be discussing attitudes, ways of thinking, the effects of experience and the intolerance of differences: that is, ideas and feelings. If ideas and feelings are out of touch, information is distorted and meanings cannot be shared.

6 *Jean is a resourceful, pleasant and helpful executive, but when she writes a letter, memo or report, her style is overly formal and brusque. She just can't communicate in writing with her junior staff.*

Jean may use the channel of speech well to convey meaning, but her lack of training and practice in written communication means she conveys information, attitudes and feelings clumsily. Meaning is not shared.

## PURPOSE IN COMMUNICATING

In our fourth definition of communication – the sharing of meaning through information, ideas and feelings – we divided meaning into information (perceived facts), ideas (concepts and opinions) and emotions (personal feelings). So, in communicating professionally, we communicate on multiple levels of meaning. Our information may be overlaid with opinion, prejudice or bias; our questions about facts may reflect doubts, perhaps self-doubt; our instructions to staff may convey distrust of them.

An important concern for people communicating in the professional sphere is the purpose of sending messages or receiving them; that is, they focus on instructions, questions and explanations, so that they contain a minimum of complexity and a maximum of clarity.

But much of the time, we give communication cues without intending to do so. For example, in a tedious meeting or seminar we may yawn rather too noticeably, advertising our lack of interest non-verbally. In a casual conversation with a colleague, we may forget to ask about his or her sick relative. Here, the absence of our inquiry communicates apathy about another's feelings. In neither case did we intend to communicate anything, but meaning could be drawn from these cues.

*Purposeful* communication is vital to your success. So you need to:

- be clear about your reason for communicating and take responsibility for your communication
- organise the message to achieve your purpose
- be clear about your meaning
- use the medium of communication to the best advantage
- frame the message to allow for any special features of the receiver(s) or the context in which communication occurs
- give your receiver(s) the opportunity to respond, so that you can see whether they have understood.



### Case study 1.2 Purposeful communication

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A ward supervisor at a hospital wishes to prevent time-wasting at morning tea breaks. She tries out a number of noticeboard messages and asks you to pick the one most likely to produce worker cooperation. The messages are:

- 1 Nursing staff are asked to respect the morning tea privilege. Ward sisters to note.
- 2 Morning tea is taking too long. Staff late back to work will lose this privilege.
- 3 Boys and girls, we know you like to chinwag at morning tea break, but give *us* a break and cut *yours* down to the allocated 15 minutes provided.
- 4 A short respite from the morning's nursing duties is provided between 10.30 and 10.45 a.m. Staff are inclined, however, to presume on the hospital's generosity

in the granting of this privilege, with the result that many do not resume normal duties for up to half an hour after the commencement of the break. Patients may be inconvenienced as a result. It is desired that staff take cognisance of the need to cooperate in this regard.

- 5 Staff are asked to limit their morning tea break to the 15 minutes provided between 10.30 and 10.45 a.m.

#### Discussion

Comment on the 'purposefulness' of each message and pick the best one. Discuss how staff might respond to each of the messages. If you wish, write a better one yourself.

After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 26 for our comments.



### Case study 1.3 Structuring the message

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Bill Snedden, the sales manager, tended to 'over-communicate'. So when Sheila Oates, one of his reps, got the following mobile phone message from Bill, she didn't listen carefully or take notes, thinking it was just general chat and didn't apply to her. Unfortunately the message was erased before she could ring back.

The message said: 'Sheila, I asked Liam and Ali to go on that assignment next Wednesday and to report at 9.30 at the Cole Bay branch of Westpac, 15 Firth Street. Liam and Ali

are the two new programmers I appointed last week, by the way. What I wanted to ask you was to go along too and show them the new IT procedures.'

#### Discussion

Examine the six aspects of purposefulness listed above and explain why Sheila had to telephone her boss that evening.

After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 26 for our comments.



In professional life you have to talk, listen, write and read to get results. So most of your daily work is communication. That is why the study of communication is so important and deserves a prominent position in all professional tertiary studies.

## THE TRANSMISSION MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

Two people speaking on the telephone provide a good example of what we shall call the transmission model of communication.

Alex telephones Rihana. He speaks into the mouthpiece and an electrical simulation of his voice is transmitted through the cable system via a series of signals and networks. So, in terms of Exhibit 1.2, Alex is the information source. His telephone transmitter encodes his voice as a signal through the channel of the telephone system to the phone receiver in Rihana's office, where it is decoded and the message reaches its destination: Rihana. The arrows in Exhibit 1.2 point from the information source, Alex, to Rihana, the destination. The model seems to suggest that communication is linear and straightforward, and that it moves only in one direction. Rihana, of course, will reply, and when she does, the roles will be reversed; Rihana becomes the information source and Alex the destination.

This transmission model can be applied to conversation in a room, even if there are multiple sources and destinations. The voices, if they can be heard above the din, are still being transmitted, but now directly, in the atmosphere of the room, by speech, which is the channel. The signals are the voices themselves, and the receivers are the hearing and mental processes of the listeners, who are of course the destinations.

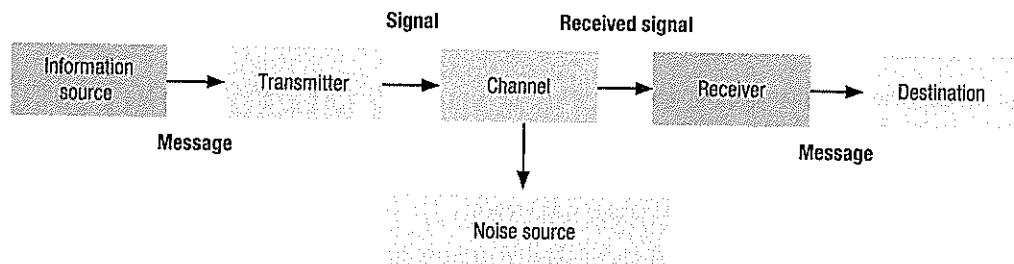
The model of transmission could also be applied to a public speech in a large hall, a lecture in a classroom, or to mediated communication on television, radio or the Internet.

The notion that ideas, facts or commands are actually conveyed as messages from one person or party to another is common. A message-centred view of communication is part of our folklore, implicit in such statements as:

- 'Am I getting through to you?'
- 'I think he's getting the message at last.'
- 'Let's see if we can push this idea at the meeting.'

The transmission model, with its emphasis on conveying a message, is also used to explain the success or failure of communication. Exhibit 1.2 includes the concept of *noise* in the channel.

**EXHIBIT 1.2** The Shannon and Weaver model of communication



Source: Mohan et al, 1997, p. 26 based on Shannon and Weaver, 1949.

Nothing spoils a telephone conversation so much as a loud buzzing noise in your ear. Alex and Rihanna may as well hang up and try again later. According to this model of communication, noise is anything that distorts the signal, and it is the signal that conveys the intended message.

This notion of human communication as transmission derives from information theory, especially the work of Shannon and Weaver, who were concerned with telecommunication theory. The main dissertation of their work is *The mathematical theory of communication* (1949), but a more manageable explanation of it can be found in Colin Cherry's *On human communication: a review, a survey, and a criticism* (1978).

But is a technical system of telephone communication comparable to what happens when human beings attempt to communicate with each other? Let's consider how Shannon and Weaver's model may apply to a human communication situation.

### *Source and receiver*

We might pursue the notion of transmission by examining another telephone conversation – between two partners in a small service-industry business. Michael telephones his business partner, Kathy. They are exchanging information, attitudes and feelings. Each takes it in turn to lead and then follow. They swap facts and figures about the business they run together. But they have different skills, different points of view, different personal needs and different approaches to business.

Michael wants the company to relocate to a city 1000 kilometres away, where labour is cheaper and transport better organised. Kathy knows her family will be upset at the idea and reminds Michael of the business advantages of their present location. The partners become angry with each other, with accusations of short-sightedness and selfishness. But they agree to drop the subject for the moment, until they feel calmer.

It looks as though we could consider Michael the source of the communication, with Kathy the receiver. Michael has a message for Kathy and uses a particular medium, the telephone, to let her know quickly of his exciting business idea. Kathy has been surprised by the call and is immediately alarmed by the message. Michael's information (the facts of the new plan promotion) is clear, but his ideas (the value of land in the other city, the demand for their product there) and his feelings (elation, pride) are not shared by Kathy. Throughout the conversation Kathy takes the initiative, arguing against Michael's case, giving him reasons why he is wrong. So Kathy becomes the source and Michael the receiver.

### *Message*

Shannon and Weaver mention the message at two stages of their model: first as it relates to the source and the transmitter, and second as it links the receiver and the destination. A message has content (its basic idea), it has structure or shape (the way the idea or information is ordered), and it has a code or codes. The structure might be a narrative, an argument or an explanation. It might involve repetition, quotations or humour. The code might be language, pictures, body movements or music, or all of these.

Consider the different ways in which the same message can be treated by three different sources, for instance:

- a scientist announcing a breakthrough in AIDS research in a medical journal
- a journalist reporting the research for readers of a Sunday newspaper
- a science teacher presenting it to a Year 12 biology group.

Each will select structure and code to convey the content effectively to the particular audience.

## *Medium/channel*

Michael uses the telephone: in fact, his mobile phone. He wants the story told quickly and confidentially. He could have sent Kathy a text message or an email but these media would lack the immediacy of the telephone call. He could hardly have dictated a letter and had it delivered to his business partner's address. Nor could he have published the news in a press release and faxed it to Kathy. He could have arranged to meet her face to face in the office or over lunch to discuss his proposal. But note that the choice of medium can be seen as an important part of the communication. It may put Kathy at a disadvantage, especially if she is busy in her own office, or at a meeting.

According to the transmission model, choosing the medium of communication is as important as constructing the message itself. Each medium has its own strengths and weaknesses. The telephone is fast but uses only the senses of speech and hearing. The telephone line may be bad; a couriered letter from the office may be too formal and may not reach Kathy if she is in another building; an email may be inappropriate for such an important discussion and Kathy may only check her email irregularly; a face-to-face meeting over lunch may have been the best channel but it may take longer to arrange if they are both very busy.

Note that the term *channel* refers to the sensory base for conveying, or transmitting, messages. For example, speech and body language are the channels for the media of conversation, interviews and public addresses. Musical instrumentation, singing and speech are the channels for opera, musical comedy and rock; speech, pictures and music are prevalent in television programs and films.

Arguably, the more channels used in a medium, the greater the depth of communication achieved. In this case, speech is the only channel available to Michael.

## *Feedback*

In the transmission model, feedback is the response to our message, the way we test the effectiveness of our communication. Not all communication involves feedback. The letter lost in the post, the telephone message given to the answering machine that failed to record, the message in a spaceship lost beyond the galaxy: these all contain messages but are not communication until they reach their destinations. For the source, it is only when there is a response that the feedback circuit is complete.

## *Noise*

One of the distinctive elements of Shannon and Weaver's model is the concept of 'noise' – that is, any element which interferes with the process of communication. In the early version of their model, the noise to which they referred was *mechanical* (actual physical interference with the signal). Later versions of the model expanded this to include *semantic noise* (breakdown of meaning between source and receiver as a result of the misuse or misinterpretation of language) and *psychological noise* (emotional barriers between parties to the communication).

### Mechanical noise

In speech communication, mechanical noise may result from many factors: poor mobile phone reception, a high frequency whine on the speaker, poor reception of a short-wave radio signal in a storm.

When speaking face to face, ambient noise in the room caused by loud music or poor acoustics may block out what people say to you. In a lecture theatre, the speaker's strong accent may be hard to decipher.

Mechanical noise is perhaps the easiest form to detect and control. You can change mobile phone providers or buy a more updated phone; get a better antenna; ask the venue to turn down the music

or improve the room furniture; ask the speaker to provide written notes for his talk or ask him to speak more slowly.

### Semantic noise

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words and we shall look at this more closely in Chapter 2. Words need to be chosen carefully to ensure that the listeners or readers ('receivers') understand them as the 'senders' intend. Senders need to take into account the receivers' level of education and vocabulary and the context in which the words are used. So if you use complex or inaccurate words, excessively technical terms or poor grammar when communicating to a particular group, you may find they either misinterpret your communication or judge it to be confusing, inappropriate or unprofessional. Ultimately this may impact on your credibility and your ability to persuade your audience of the validity of your ideas or the sincerity of your intentions.

### Psychological noise

We often come to a communication encounter with preconceived notions, attitudes, biases or prejudices about either the speaker, the message itself or perhaps the organisation from whom the message is being sent. This type of 'noise' may interfere with how we interpret or understand a message. For example, a person who is uninterested in sport may have difficulty being convinced by a speech about an inspirational sports person who has achieved their goals while overcoming personal difficulties. A student who has had a poor experience with maths in high school may come to a research methods course anxious and concerned about failing and complain that the subject is 'boring'. A bank customer whose mother was denied a loan or who received poor customer service ten years ago may not believe that bank's most recent advertising efforts claiming that they put customers' needs first. All these constitute psychological noise.



### Case study 1.4 Identifying 'noise' in written communication

Here are some passages of text that we have extracted from recent publications. Each one has an example of a form of 'noise' that we have just described. Read them through and classify each as mechanical, semantic or psychological. Make sure you can explain your choice. After you have discussed this case study, turn to page 26 for our comments.

- 1 You will hear from us as soon as we have investigated your claims.
- 2 The estate will be divided equally between his brother and his wife's three sisters.
- 3 We trust that in future you will not fall behind in your instalments.
- 4 Peter did not trust the surgeon after he broke both his hands.
- 5 Ku-Ring-Gai council has broken new ground by organising a symposium on urban bushland management for Saturday evening (11 October). It is the first time a council has arranged a symposium to discuss thoroughly its bushland reserves.
- 6 We need to achieve conceptual communication criteria with a view to bringing about a dynamic parameters analysis. Overall capabilities implementation is compatible with the modular facilities interface.

### Encoding and decoding

Schramm's model (see Exhibit 1.3) introduces the concepts of *encoding* – the packaging or translating of an idea into a form in which it can be communicated – and *decoding* – the interpretation, translation or unpackaging of a message. For example, if we want to communicate the idea of danger we could use the word danger in a loud voice, we could use the colour red in a flashing light or we

could use a loud sound like a siren. This reminds us that communication is symbolic and that it is carried out using signs and symbols: mainly language, but also non-verbal, visual and aural signs that have meaning assigned to them within a culture or between cultures. So the message, usually in words, is encoded into language and decoded by the receiver, who encodes a response that is conveyed back to the original encoder. The process is circular and continuous. There is no specific source and receiver, just a process of interactivity with two or more parties encoding messages in words or other symbols, interpreting these symbols and encoding responses. This is a useful model in that it links the notions of circularity and feedback.

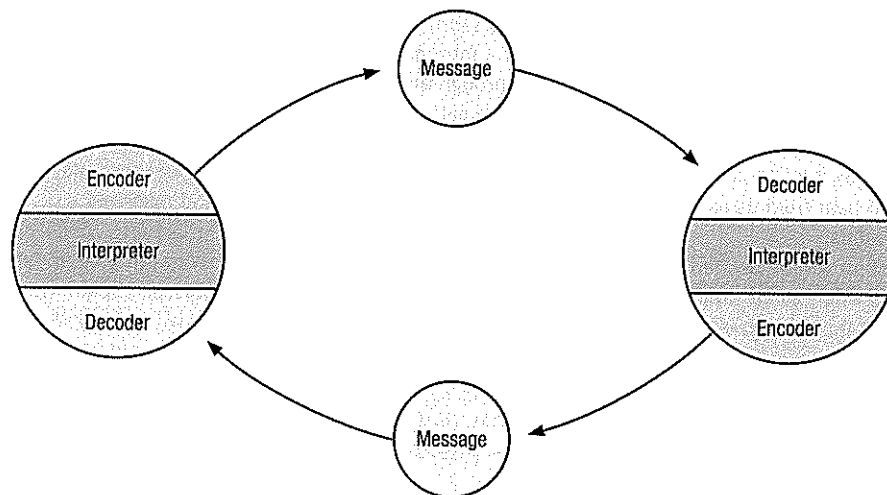
In business and professional life, we speak or write to achieve results. Too often words fall on deaf ears because the message is out-of-date, boring, threatening or too technical, or because the wrong channel or medium has been chosen to convey the message. It is important that the source tests the effectiveness of his or her message. In the case of Michael and Kathy, Michael receives very strong, and negative, feedback from Kathy.

Opportunities for feedback vary a lot according to the form of communication, the social context, and the emphasis on transmission or transaction involved.

In face-to-face conversation we can immediately begin to appreciate what people think of our ideas, through their words, gestures and expressions. While watching television we may wish to contact an announcer about some remark that has annoyed us. But this contact may be delayed and our complaint not passed on. We may read in a professional journal some disparaging statement about a colleague we respect. If we wish to have the record corrected, it may take months before the next edition of the journal comes out, if ever.

At the same time, it is not easy to get people to give you feedback. University lecturers and teachers are often anxious to measure the success of their lectures or tutorials. They may seek feedback by asking the group to write a summary of what has been said; to give their opinions on the points

### EXHIBIT 1.3 Schramm's circular model of communication



Source: Schramm 1954, p. 24.

made; to give examples of the points made from their own experience; or to conduct a 'buzz session' in which they chat informally in pairs about what has been said and then criticise or support it. They could also issue 'lecturer evaluation forms' in which students comment on their teachers' success in explaining aspects of the course.

### *Summary of the transmission model of communication*

The value of the transmission model of communication lies in its emphasis on the elements in a communication process. The model reminds us that:

- sources or senders should think carefully about the effect they wish to achieve before communicating
- they should therefore structure their message carefully, using codes likely to be familiar to their receivers
- the choice of channel or medium can be vital to the success of a communication
- the elements of skills, attitudes, knowledge, social system and cultural awareness all play a part in the sending and receiving of messages. Overlooking the importance of any one of these elements in the receivers can disrupt communication
- various types of 'noise' can interfere with the process of communication
- feedback evaluates communication, but that feedback should be sought out as expertly as possible.

As we have said, the transmission model of communication derives from what is known as information theory, with Shannon and Weaver's work the main source.

Critics of the transmission model say it places too much emphasis on the message and the channel of communication. More importantly, they criticise it as being 'reductionist'. They say you cannot reduce or isolate the elements of a communication situation and make any sense out of them, because communication is a 'big picture' that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Critics also argue that the model assumes that communication is *linear*, with the sender being the active participant who determines the meaning while the receiver is the passive target. They argue that communication between two people involves simultaneous 'sending' and 'receiving', not only of words and language but of non-verbal signals such as body language.

You may be able to explain the workings of an internal combustion engine by discussing in isolation the parts of the motor and showing that when one of these breaks down, the whole structure is endangered. But human communication is not mechanical. Thus, critics say that the use of an analogy between the mechanical and the human is simplistic and misleading.

Furthermore, they argue that by placing too much emphasis on the parties to the communication and the elements within them, the model completely ignores the central issue in communication – meaning. They also claim that the model ignores the way in which meaning is created, sustained and shared between two or more parties. Chandler (1994) argues that the transmission model relies too heavily on the *conduit metaphor* of communication acts whereby 'the speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes the idea/objects out of the word/container.' This assumes that meaning is *extracted* rather than *constructed*.

## THE TRANSACTION MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

The transaction model of communication does not see communication as flowing from a source to a receiver and back. Rather, two or more parties respond to a phenomenon or to the environment

and bring to it their own set of interpretations. They negotiate meanings and are themselves changed by the experience.

### *The place of meaning*

A favourite saying in communication studies is 'Meanings are in people, not in words'. In other words, meaning is in the *interpretation* of words, not the words themselves. Even simple terms like *good relations*, *a positive environment*, *maximum productivity* and *organisational loyalty* can mean very different things to two or three different members of a company or organisation. In the first place, people interpret meanings in context; that is, in a social situation at a certain time, between particular individuals or groups. Outside the given context, meanings may vary considerably. Furthermore, meanings do not remain constant even to each person using the words in similar situations or contexts.

For example, in an interview we may be subject to a number of different cues or indicators of meaning. If you are being interviewed for a job, you may be sensitive to:

- the interviewer's smile as you are invited to sit down (a positive cue)
- the interviewer's enthusiastic tone while reading through your letter of application and CV (a positive cue)
- the drumming of fingers as the interviewer looks up with a frown at the wall clock (a negative cue)
- the interviewer's stifled yawn while listening to your hesitant account of your recent retrenchment from another job (a negative cue).

From this composite experience of speech, gesture, movement and facial expression, you may emerge from the interview room saying to yourself, 'I don't think I'll get that job. The supervisor thought I was too inexperienced.' That is the meaning you assign to the interview. Note that much of the meaning in this interview arose from non-verbal cues and their interpretation. We analyse this means of communication more closely in Chapter 3.

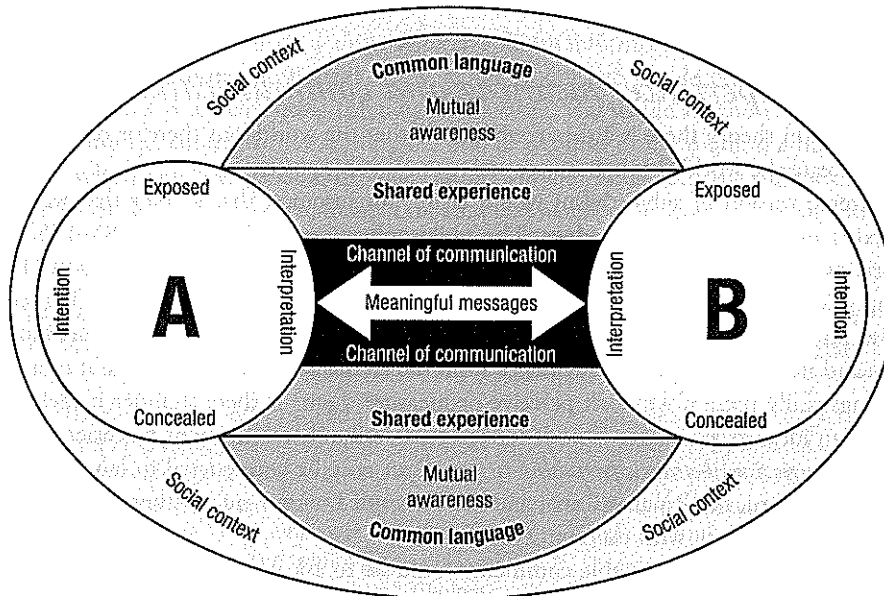
Further examples of the dynamic (or constantly changing) nature of meaning are:

- a sudden change of mind for no apparent reason
- a sudden insight into a problem long after it has been unsuccessfully explained to us
- two completely different interpretations by two people of the same set of words – for example, a letter or email to staff or students.

So there is no guarantee that identical inputs will lead to the same result, or that the same message will generate identical meanings for all parties, or even for a single individual, on different occasions. We are not like computers or telephone systems that can be programmed to give predictable results. Such systems are called 'closed' or 'deterministic'. Human systems are not deterministic, but rather spontaneous and discretionary. In other words, they respond not only to clearly articulated facts, agreeable attitudes and pleasant feelings, but also to moods, distractions and impulses, all of which can change moment by moment.

This is not to say that our behaviour is chaotic and completely unpredictable. People usually act fairly consistently. Most of us try to 'make sense' of our experiences. We use sign systems (mainly language) to keep us from communicating too idiosyncratically. We discuss this further in Chapter 2.

The model by Price (based on McQuail, 1984) (see Exhibit 1.4) introduces the notions of *social context* and the mutual interpretation of meaningful messages in an atmosphere of *shared experience* in a *common language*. You can see how communication could fail where some or all of these ingredients are missing. A shared social context, shared experience and a common language are likely to produce better communication between strangers meeting in the city or a group working together for the first time (say as a jury) than where some or all of these are missing.

**EXHIBIT 1.4** A meaning-oriented model of communication

Source: Price 1996, p. 44, based on description in McQuail 1984.

We might illustrate this concept of meaning creation by observing two solicitors in an interview. They are both women in their twenties, negotiating on behalf of their clients for an out-of-court settlement of a damages suit. The stages in their meeting might go like this:

- Stage 1 Before the meeting each has been briefed about the case, the arguments of the other side, and the claim she will try to justify.
- Stage 2 Each enters the meeting room, nervous of the other's reputation and determined not to be intimidated.
- Stage 3 They chat amiably for a few minutes, to get each other's measure. They are pleased they get on well together.
- Stage 4 They begin to bargain, and there is tension as each tries to get the advantage.
- Stage 5 They respond to non-verbal cues, such as each other's appearance, voice and mannerisms.
- Stage 6 Both are relieved when they break for coffee. There is a joke about the weather.
- Stage 7 They become tense again when approaching the final point of the settlement.
- Stage 8 When agreement is reached and each feels her client will be pleased, they relax together with some colleagues over drinks at the bar.

During this interview each lawyer has been constructing her own *meaning* of the situation. The meanings change as the interview proceeds. Perhaps the setting or environment is the central point. The room itself generates feelings and meanings, with its austere lines and abstract, postmodernist wall hangings. For each, the meanings of *negotiate*, *conflict*, *compromise*, *satisfactory settlement* and *victory* all develop and change as each stage of the discussion is passed.

Most of all, the relationship between the two people changes subtly throughout the discussion. It may harden into settled dislike and mutual suspicion, or, as we suggested, soften into camaraderie.



Therefore, the transaction model of communication does not see communication as flowing from a source to a receiver and back. Rather, two or more parties respond to a phenomenon or to their environment and bring to it their own set of interpretations. They negotiate meanings and are themselves changed by the experience.

### *Individual experience, meaning and communication*

In communication theory there is a debate about whether the world 'out there' is objectively real or whether we create the world through our consciousness, subjectively.

The extreme version of subjectivism would claim, for instance, that a chair that we see by the window exists only if we believe it does. The philosopher George Berkeley (1685–1753) claimed that objects exist only in the imagination of the observer. The writer Samuel Johnson (1709–84), on hearing this theory, gave a chair a kick, hurt his toe, and said 'I refute it thus!' Berkeley was a subjectivist. Johnson was a realist and an empiricist: that is, one who believes that facts are independent of theories and that one can produce evidence from the factual world to prove a point of argument.

Are things really there if we don't perceive or measure them? Is there thunder if there is no-one to hear it? Can ideas exist if there is no language to describe them? It might be easier to argue that concepts like *patriotism*, *betrayal*, *friendship* or *greed* can only be constructed in language. But we're pretty sure that Uluru, the Panama Canal and the Tower of London are out there whether you and I have visited and seen them with our own eyes or not.

A more moderate and sustainable comment would be to ask what our favourite chair means to each of us: what kind of a chair it is; how well built it is; how stylish it is; and what memories and emotions, if any, it triggers in us when we look at it or sit in it. To these questions there would be a diversity of answers, and hence a variety of meanings of *chair*. Whether you are a subjectivist, a realist or an empiricist, you do, to an extent, construct your own reality; that is, give meanings to facts and events, which are different from those given to them by other people.

### *The personal construction of reality*

To further highlight the primacy of meaning rather than message in communication, consider what we mean by the *personal construction* of reality, and why people have so many different opinions about films, television programs, football codes (and players), and even chairs! Constructivists are communication scholars who say we give meanings to objects, people and ideas according to our cognitive systems; that is, our systems of mental processing. The meanings we give are based on our experiences and conditioning. These meanings in turn determine our communication (Griffin 2003, pp. 115–31).

Does this personal construction of reality produce great gaps of understanding between people? Can't we even agree that two plus two equals four? Or that water freezes at zero degrees Celsius at sea level? These two propositions may be difficult to deny, but think about the following statements:

- 'The 10.45 bus is late again! It's now 10.50.'
- 'Gee, that HR manager is arrogant!'

Is five minutes late today, always late? What is arrogance? Is one person's arrogance another person's firmness of purpose?

Let's pursue this idea of individual experience. How do we experience the world around us? We do so through our sensory nerve endings. Objects in our world stand out because of their shape, colour, size, sound and smell. The act of interpreting these sensory stimuli is called 'perception', and is a very important part of understanding how we communicate and make meaning from the world around us.

Try 'looking' at an object in front of you now. Say it is the window frame of the room and it is five metres away. Are your eyes just a camera that records this sight? Apparently not. In fact, light waves are reflected off the window frame and impinge on the retina of your eye. Visual nerves send electrical impulses through the sensory apparatus to the cortex. These are recorded and decoded by the brain.

### *Summary of the transaction model of communication*

The transaction model foregrounds meaning rather than message: its creation and sharing, its subjectivity and unreliability, and the fact that there is always a gap between meanings attributed to the same phenomena. People, it says, create their individual meanings and social groups do the same. We see the world through our own frames of reference and also through the society we belong to. Society is the way we organise our communication, lives and relationships.

## EVALUATING THE TWO MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

The two approaches to communication developed so far are:

- 1 the *transmission model*, which sees communication as the transfer of messages from a source to a receiver, using a channel and medium
- 2 the *transaction model*, which sees communication as the creation or negotiation of meaning in two or more parties responding to their environment and to each other.

Note that these models are attempts to explain normal behaviour; they are not developed theories of communication. They can only have value for us if they sketch the likely course of a communication event.

Both these models have value and both have weaknesses.

The transmission model uses mechanistic terms like *source*, *receiver*, *feedback* and *noise*, and it assumes that information moves in a linear way from A to B. This model has value in helping us to think carefully about how we might construct a message to deliver to particular people in various ways. But mechanistic terms can be applied to human communication only as analogies or metaphors. Human communication is not mechanical, closed or predictable. You may ensure that your message allows for feedback, but you cannot be sure of the exact content or value of the feedback, or of its meaning. There is no way of ensuring that the message received is the same as the message sent.

The transaction model also concentrates on meaning. It may be useful in analysing the complexities of conversations, interviews, negotiations or large meetings and is helpful in allowing us to understand that communication is not always predictable and that the situation or context in which communication takes place can have a significant impact on how parties communicate. This model also has value in helping us to check that we have shared our intended meaning with others. It may be less helpful in explaining how ideas are disseminated in a society or culture, how voters change their minds about candidates, or how some books become bestsellers in spite of critical reviews.

## SUMMING UP

There are varied definitions of communication relevant to the student in search of a profession. Some emphasise the transfer or transmission of knowledge, others the mutual creation of meaning, yet others the building of understanding and cooperation. Students benefit by understanding communication processes and strategies, and by developing skills in language use, but most of all, perhaps, by being clear about their purpose in communicating. Whether seen as transmission or transaction, communication takes place within a social, cultural and ethical setting. It is influenced by the communicator's personal and social construction of reality and by the meanings they, and others, give to life around them. The chapters which follow examine in more detail specific dimensions of communication that range from intrapersonal, interpersonal, group and intercultural to mediated, and all these dimensions, or settings, strongly influence the meanings conveyed and received.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND GROUP ACTIVITIES

For discussion topics and activities in addition to those listed below, please refer to the case studies presented throughout this chapter.

### Defining communication

- 1 Which of the four definitions of communication on pages 6 and 7 seems to be the most useful and appropriate in your work as a student?
- 2 Which forms of communication are most important in your profession? Give some examples and situations in which communication competence is important for you as a professional.
- 3 Discuss one recent case involving professional life in which poor communication has had serious results.
- 4 What do you understand by 'whistleblowing' among professionals? You may need to do some research on this one.
- 5 Examine and discuss the ethics involved in a recent case of whistleblowing in your profession.

### The transmission model of communication

- 6 Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan said, 'The medium is the message' (1967, p. 15). He meant that the choice of medium can transform a message and its meaning. Discuss this idea.
- 7 We claim earlier (page 12) that the choice of media is as important as the message itself. If you were asked to give advice to the 500 students in Stage 1 of your course on plagiarism and how to avoid it, how would you communicate your message? Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each of these forms of media to communicate this message to this particular audience:
  - a word-of-mouth communication in small-group briefing sessions
  - b email announcements to all students
  - c an article in the weekly student newspaper
  - d a speech to the whole group in a large lecture hall with accompanying PowerPoint slideshow
  - e a continuous video, set up in the student cafeteria
  - f an interactive, self-paced tutorial on the faculty's website.

### Feedback

- 8 We define *feedback* as the response to a message. Without it, we cannot be sure we have

communicated effectively. But how do we get feedback? Form groups of four or five and discuss specific methods of seeking feedback in the two situations below. Compile the list on a whiteboard, overhead transparency or butcher's paper and compare your list to those of other groups.

- a Your lecturer keeps giving you poor marks for written assignments but few comments. You would like to improve your assessments.
- b Promotion is coming slowly to you in the firm. Despite having finished a higher degree and having won two company awards for creative designs, you have remained in the same position for three years while watching contemporaries surge ahead of you.

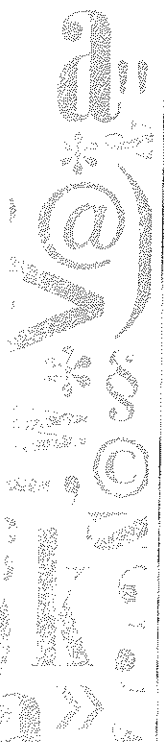
### The transaction model of communication

- 9 Test the claim that 'Meanings are in people, not in words'. Ask members of your group to write down and then compare notes on brief definitions of the following:
  - company loyalty
  - the climate crisis
  - sustainable development
  - globalisation
  - border protection
  - professional integrity
  - crisis management
  - spin doctoring.
- 10 On separate sheets of paper, write one-sentence definitions of *professionalism*, *loyalty*, *quality*, *productivity* and *transparency*. Then, in small groups, exchange your definitions and discuss the varieties of meaning. Note the differences of perspective and emphasis.
- 11 Write a sentence containing a statement of fact, as you see it. For example, 'Redheads are bad tempered.' Exchange your statement for a partner's sentence and see if you can agree on its meaning.

## COMMENTS ON CASE STUDIES

Case study 1.1: Communication ethics in the professions (page 5)

Ethical considerations are basic to communication generally and to professional communication at all times. In this case study we are interested in your experience and insights and perhaps some of the ethical dilemmas you have faced. Many ethicists, like Dr Simon Longstaff, believe that professionals should act not only in the interests of their own organisations



and its shareholders, but also in the interests of the greater community, and this is what he means by the 'social compact'.

Later in the text we consider ethics in terms of language, research techniques, letter and report writing, intercultural communication competence and mediated communication. So without laying down strict ethical advice we might consider ethics to be a subtext of all we say or don't say, be it in negotiations, persuasive speeches such as sales pitches, or written workplace documents, submissions and promotions.

### Case study 1.2: Purposeful communication (page 9)

If the purpose of the notice is to get support and conformity, then (1) is too impersonal and formal, and lacks specific information; (2) is too threatening, and also fails to give exact times for the break; (3) is patronising and cloying; and (4) is longwinded and pompous. We think (5) is preferable; it is easily read and understood and gives exact times. Does the group agree? Is your choice better than any of the others?

### Case study 1.3: Structuring the message (page 9)

Bill Snedden's phone message is poorly constructed. Sheila sees no relevance to herself until the end, by which time she has forgotten the instructions and has accidentally deleted the message. Bill should probably have begun with a request to her to go with the new staff. If Bill had initially focused on what he wanted Sheila to do, she would have listened more carefully to the detail.

### Case study 1.4: Identifying 'noise' in written communication (page 13)

We would classify the sentences as follows:

- 1 Psychological noise: The tone could be regarded as blunt and offensive. Use of the word 'investigated' creates an overtone of distrust.
- 2 Semantic noise: This sentence is ambiguous. Does his brother receive 50 per cent or 25 per cent of the estate?
- 3 Psychological noise: Again the tone is threatening and accusing. The use of the phrase 'we trust that in future ...' is patronising.
- 4 Semantic noise: Again, this sentence is ambiguous. Whose hands were broken – the surgeon's or Peter's? Or did the surgeon break both of Peter's hands?

- 5 Mechanical and psychological noise: Poorly and inconsistently spelt documents may convey a lack of expertise or a lack of care or professionalism. If someone cannot spell, do they really know the subject? Media releases like these are the public face of an organisation and poor attention to technical detail not only makes the text harder to understand but also may adversely impact on the perception readers have of the organisation.
- 6 Semantic noise: This kind of jargon often appears in business and policy writing, often because the writer wants to impress the reader with their expertise or their status. The message usually turns out to be meaningless or an inflated version of what the writer is communicating.

### Case study 1.5: Supermarket sales tactics and perception (page 19)

The human brain experiences the outside world via the five senses and filters and organises the stimuli until it has meaning. In order to deal with the mass of stimuli from the outside world, such as the multitude of colours, smells, sounds, shapes and so on in a supermarket, the brain uses organisational patterns or schema to shape interpretation. Marketers have long studied the psychology of human behaviour to distinguish their products from the many others in a supermarket and this list includes only some of the strategies they use. This illustrates how reality is constructed by the way our brain processes sights, sounds, smells and so on and by how we have learned to interpret these meanings.

## WEBSITES

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication_theory) [Wikipedia]
- <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/hcr> [Human Communication Research]
- <http://www.hcrc.ed.ac.uk/> [Human Communication Research Centre]
- <http://www.oxfordjournals.org/help/moved/> [Oxford journals]
- <http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=1050-3293> [Wiley-Blackwell journal Communication Theory]
- [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikimedia/en-labs/5/51/Communication\\_Theory.pdf](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikimedia/en-labs/5/51/Communication_Theory.pdf)