
NOTES, OBSERVATION AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Understanding Communication Research Findings

A central aspect of communication research is widely misunderstood, ignored, or not known by researchers in other fields and by the public. The problems this creates are discussed; the correct understanding is identified, and an appeal is made for attention to the issue by researchers.

This note examines a problem in my field of communication theory and research that has been plaguing us for decades. The problem is not that we do not have some valuable knowledge for researchers of consumer affairs and many other research fields and for the general public as well. Indeed, we know something very valuable for such others in their work and their daily lives, but we have not been very successful in convincing them of it. Aspects of human behavior seem to be all too effective in thwarting our efforts.

I first encountered this matter in my grad study at Michigan State University in a department at the communication college that specialized in theory and research. My first class in 1959 stressed the very central point that “Meanings are in people, not in messages”—not in words, nor pictures, nor sounds—nowhere in messages. It was like a mantra. We did not actually chant it, but we certainly said it often.

The point reflected how on numerous campuses in the 1950s and 1960s these schools, known generally as “journalism” schools, were acquiring new kinds of faculty. They were researchers, and they came in alongside the “old pros” of the mass media fields who had been on hand since the beginning. The change reflected appreciation of the psychologists’ formula of S–R, stimulus and response. That was fifty years ago, and many communication programs were still teaching only the stimulus, meaning how to prepare news stories, advertisements, and so on. They could certainly fill up

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their courses with that good topic, but my program was urging us grad students to teach the response also when we became faculty.

Many academics and other people, we were told, place the meaning of a message *in the message* and thus were also likely to believe that the critical opening response, that is, the message people saw being communicated, would be the same for the whole audience. It is not without common sense, after all, to think that if the message is the same for all, then the way people perceive it must be too.

Yet all of us who gather *data* on such responses know that the latter often show great variation. Accordingly, we routinely study mass media effects via a response orientation. But, despite our efforts, many people elsewhere stick to the older and more traditional message orientation.

Two consumer economists presented a content analysis of cigarette ads at a Public Policy & Marketing Conference prior to publication (Ringold and Calfee 1989). They reported that various claims were stated and also that those claims were taken by consumers to mean certain things. A consumer psychologist objected to such understanding being inferred only from the messages, and one hell of an argument broke out. The psychologist later wrote that the study found only what was *said* and not what was communicated (Cohen 1989). But the economists could not understand that. They thought everything is evident from what is said. That many researchers make such assumptions was supported recently in this journal by a marketing researcher who is a former editor of the *Journal of Advertising* Carlson (2008). The problem is also noted by Petty (2008).

Although communication is often a topic in the work of economists and other consumer researchers, it seems evident that many are not aware of this problem. Herbert Jack Rotfeld, editor of *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, reports having frequently to eliminate errors on the point in letters to prospective authors (e.g., Rotfeld 2008). And Herb along with Ray Taylor, as editors of an upcoming special issue on regulation and self-regulation of the *Journal of Advertising*, have been seeing a number of articles that assume what is communicated is identified sufficiently by what is said (H. J. Rotfeld and C. R. Taylor, pers. comm.).

Further, the Federal Trade Commission for some time has been using consumer economists as substitutes for consumer psychologists. The switch does not work when economists rely on assumptions about response while psychologists make actual observations. Some economists have abandoned such habits, but the problem of suitable evidence remains.

Much of my own experience pertinent to this topic has been with government regulators. I first became interested in their work from seeing that they identify deceptive claims based on their findings of what is communicated—a

perfect fit with what I had studied. But in 1971 when the Federal Trade Commission asked me to be an expert witness on what was communicated, I did not like their proposed method, which was simply to have me state my presumably expert opinion. I proposed doing instead a consumer survey on what was communicated, but they said they had no money for it. I countered that I could use student subjects and do it almost for free, and ultimately, they agreed. It worked and was the first of many surveys they have commissioned over all these years (Sun Oil Co. 1974). I feel it is the most significant thing I have done professionally.

I also found, however, that with claims of opinion or valuation, puffery, the regulators *do not* make observations—they just make the assumption that consumers take puffs to mean nothing. Regarding the accuracy of that, they unfortunately have no idea, having not looked to see. They decide merely by their legal authority, which for puffery is typically by citing precedents, with the earliest precedent being about 250 years before psychology even became a discipline (Preston 1996).

That is the essential foundation of what I have written about puffery (Preston 1996). Many see it as a consumer protection issue, which of course it is, but to me, it is predominantly about people not knowing because of not looking. Such procedure is, among other things, incredibly disrespectful of research. They use us when they think our findings will suit their purpose. But when they do not, they do not.

The problem occurs in other areas of the law. There was the Supreme Court justice who said he did not have a definition for pornography, “but I know it when I see it” (*Jacobellis v. Ohio* 1964). He had no appreciation that others might see it differently. We might expect people acting in professional capacities to consider themselves obligated to follow the known principles of communication when they work therein, but they often just do not.

We could also note how ordinary citizens often interpret meanings as being in messages rather than in people. People let their egos get in the way—they see such and such to be the message; therefore, they think everyone does. Another contributing point, especially in light of its strong reiteration by some observers over many decades, is the apparent belief by so many citizens, even though false, that advertising in general, including subliminal content, has a power to control minds so strong that there is no point in trying to resist taking it literally (Broyles 2006). Such factors are probably the biggest source of trouble for communication researchers in making their point.

Consequently, I conclude that over the fifty years I have been contemplating the paradigm that meanings are in people, I do not think my field has gotten much of anywhere in establishing it as a working principle. Yes,

there are more of *us* who know it than before, and the number of students who have heard it also keeps rising. But the point has not really been instilled into the public consciousness. Many people still have a knee-jerk reaction in the other direction.

The situation bodes poorly for researchers because if we cannot establish this simple point, there is a severe limitation on what can be accomplished. In the future, I hope that all parties involved with drawing conclusions about response to communications will do their best always to make the point, explicitly, that actual observation is essential and, in the context of each study, to emphasize what we would be missing without it.

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