THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

COMMUNICATION CONDUCT IN AN ISLAND COMMUNITY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
DECEMBER, 1953

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PART FOUR

THE CONCRETE UNITS OF CONVERSATIONAL COMMUNICATION

CHAPTER VIII

INTRODUCTION

At this point it seems proper to provide a more systematic statement of some of the assumptions and definitions which underlie some of the terms and usages appearing in the first three parts. At the same time it is also necessary to provide some very elementary definitions as a background for what is to follow.

A body of information that is transferred from one place to another is commonly called a message. A message involves a configuration of signs and the transmission of physical carriers, or what have come to be called vehicles, of these signs. We usually think of vehicles as issuing from a sign-source, and we think of vehicles as being impelled from a source with a sign-impulse of given force or intensity, and as being impelled in a particular direction. The process of impulsion is usually called transmission, and arrangement of vehicles for the purpose of transmission is usually called encoding. A physical field in which vehicles of a given kind can be transmitted may be called a medium. We usually think of a medium in reference to the particular type of equipment--human and non-human--which must be employed if the signs transmitted in the medium are to be received. The source of sign-impulse may be called a transmitter and the agency

which receives the signs a receiver. It is to be noted that the terms so far defined pertain to the physical aspects of communication, not to the social setting in which communication occurs.

When an individual exercises his physical capacity as a transmitter or receiver, we find that he may also take on communication roles of a social kind. The individual may be held to be personally responsible for the content of a given message and for having initially transmitted it; the message in question is thought to be his message. Where these conditions prevail, we shall say that the individual has the social role of sender. On the other hand, the individual may be held to be the one for whom the message is specifically and admittedly intended; the message in question is thought to terminate properly with him. Where these conditions prevail, we shall say that the individual has the social role of recipient.

The social roles of sender and recipient seem to be the most basic ones in communication, but certain additional ones are clearly defined and heavily institutionalized in our society. A person may perform the role of drafter, this role entailing the rough formulation of messages that are later checked over and authorized by the sender who will be made responsible for the content of the message. Specialists of this kind may be found in large-scale formal organizations, and are not responsible, in certain ways, for the message which they help to formulate. A person may perform the task of relayer, receiving a message from its sender (or from another relayer), encoding it for retransmission and retransmitting it to a recipient (or to another relayer).

This is the case with stenographers and telegraphers. Finally, a person may perform the task of courier, conveying a message from one point to another without knowing what is in the message. This is the role that postmen take.

Persons who have the task of drafting messages, or relaying them, or carrying them, have the social duty of acting as if they were merely instruments, not persons. They operate under a strong moral obligation not to take advantage of the position in which their occupational duties place them.

It is apparent that persons who are employed merely to assist in the task of communication may abuse their position and make inappropriate use of the information their occupational role has put them in a position to receive. This would seem to be especially likely where those who assist in the process of communication happen to be in additional relationships to those whom they assist. Under these circumstances, effective segregation between the role of communication assistant and other roles would presumably be difficult. For example, on the island, persons who use the telephone and telegraph tend to allow for the fact that messages may not remain a secret. There is a cautionary tale about a previous telegrapher's agent who held up government notification of a rise in the price of fish for one night so that a relative could buy up the island's catch at a low price and sell it, off the island, at an enormous profit.

A sender, then, is the person who initially transmits the authorized version of a message, and the recipient is the person for whom the message is intended. Usually these two roles are

the basic ones, regardless of how many persons have helped to prepare, retransmit, or carry the message.

The physical capacity of persons to communicate with one another in one or more media is obviously related to the fixed physiological characteristics of man as an instrument for transmitting and receiving messages. For example, sounds with a frequency over sixteen hundred cycles per second cannot be directly used for signalling between persons, but these sounds can be used for signalling from a person to an animal and from animal to animal. The capacity to communicate is also related to variable factors which effectively increase or decrease natural human capacity. Three of these factors may be mentioned. First, there are behavioral devices such as whispering, shouting, "encoding," and focusing of attention. For example, parents frequently exclude children from communication by spelling messages out or by using a language not known to their children. Governments employ similar devices in order to send messages while at the same time maintaining "security." When Berganders meet on the mainland of Britain, they sometimes make use of the Bergand dialect in order to talk to each other in a way which can be heard but not understood by those around them. Secondly, there are transmission barriers such as walls, intervening persons, and noises. For example, persons in a crowded city street can come close to each other physically without realizing that this has been the case, whereas persons who live or work where there are few intervening barriers to communication can engage in certain kinds of communication over relatively great distances. For example, most of those

who fish in the ocean waters around Dixon are acquainted with one another and can identify each other's crafts (and are known to be able to do so) from a great distance. Thus when two boats come within about half a mile of each other, recognition and greeting is given by means of hand waving or tooting, and this courtesy is an expected thing. Thirdly, there are mechanical aids, such as telephones and mail services. For example, shepherds on the island often make use of a whistle and a staff as a means of increasing signalling power with respect to their sheep dogs; without these mechanical adjuncts certain kinds of land could not be readily utilized for grazing.

In order for communication to occur, certain minimum physical conditions must be satisfied. The person who transmits the message (whether in the capacity of sender or relayer) generally must be allowed to complete a meaningful unit of communication. His message must not be "jammed" by competing messages nor by disturbances which distract recipients who wish to be attentive. The recipient, obviously, must be close enough to the source of sign-impulse to receive the message and must focus enough of his attention to make effective use of this position. Further, the signs transmitted to the recipient must be of the kind that the recipient's equipment is prepared for or geared for; in other words, the signs must be "meaningful" to the recipient. These conditions are imposed by the extra-social characteristics of human condition, yet these conditions must be satisfied by habitual social arrangements.

In all communication situations the possibility arises

that the recipient will not correctly interpret or understand the message that is conveyed to him. Whenever a relayer and/or a courier are involved as mediating agents in the conveyance of a message, additional opportunities for confusion arise. The message may become (advertantly or inadvertantly) lost or modified in transit.[1] Also, the message may be ascribed to someone who did not in fact send it. We may then say that communication situations vary according to the degree to which the sender can be assured that his message has been received by the persons for whom it was intended and has been correctly received by them. We may also say that situations vary according to the amount of usable proof they offer a recipient that the message received by him is the message transmitted by the sender. When communication between two persons is mediated by a rigorously institutionalized relayer, such as a telegrapher, or when there is no mediating agent, as in the case of face-to-face interaction, we frequently find that neither sender nor recipient is in a position with respect to the other to deny the existence and character of the message. When communication between two persons is mediated by an informal relayer, as in the important case where a sender tells a recipient what an absent person has said about him, we find that the absent person is usually in a position to deny that he made the statement in question. We also find that the recipient is usually in

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[1] In formal organizations, practices are sometimes employed to minimize these kinds of confusion. Important words in telegrams are repeated, duplicate messages are sometimes sent in alternate media, and recipients may be required to send return evidence of having correctly received the message.

a position to act as if there were some doubt that the absent person really sent the message in question. These objective communication characteristics may account in part for the social fact that persons in our society exercise much less care in their treatment of individuals who are absent than in their treatment of individuals who are present.

The framework of this study is chiefly concerned with the kind of communication which is unassisted by mechanical devices or by persons acting in the mediating capacities of relayer or courier. We are concerned with communication between persons who are immediately present to each other, where the sender is at the same time the transmitter or physical source of the sign-impulse.[1] The justification for this limitation of scope rests on the empirical fact that persons present are treated very differently from persons absent. It appeared that a study focused on one kind of treatment could not easily deal with the other kind of treatment.

Interaction between persons who are immediately present to each other possesses some crucial communication characteristics.

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[1]In recent literature the term "small group" has been widely used to designate the research area of face-to-face interaction. There is little excuse for this usage. The term group has a relatively distinct meaning in sociology. Face-to-face interaction regularly occurs among the members of small groups, but frequently the kind of behavior which students describe when they study interaction in this context is not characteristic of persons in their capacity as members of small groups but rather of persons in their capacity as immediate interactants. The latter behavior occurs between persons who regularly have dealings with each other but who do not constitute a small group, and it even occurs between persons who come into each others presence only once.

One of these characteristics--the "non-deniable" nature of messages--has already been mentioned; others will be considered later. None the less, the criterion of immediate presence provides a heuristic delimitation of scope, not an analytical one. From the point of view of communication, face-to-face interaction does not seem to present a single important characteristic that is not found--at least within certain limits--in mediated communication situations.

In the study of immediate communication, we deal with signs of which the sender is the actual physical source: sender and transmitter are one. On the whole we deal with signs transmitted by gesture and with auditory signs transmitted by speech. (The olfactory medium, as in the case of perfumes and body odors, and the tactile medium, as in the case of nudges, do not seem to play a major role in immediate communication.) And for the most part, we do not deal with lines or channels of communication which are open to reception or transmission at either end but rather with zones, anywhere within which a message may be received. Persons who are within the zone where reception of a given impulse is possible are usually said to be in range of the impulse. The shape of zones in cases of immediate communication is an important factor and is dependent upon a complex set of interdependent elements.[1]

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[1]The body of a sender is a transmission barrier from the point of view of those who are behind the sender; it is a focusing reflector from the point of view of those who are in front of him. This gives a conical-shaped stress to zones of communication, with the source of impulse at the apex of the cone. This directional effect is especially apparent in the

In considering the factors which influence the shape of communication zones, we must also consider the factors which influence the effectiveness of a recipient once a zone of communication has been established. The volume of a visual or auditory zone can be increased slightly by a recipient's concentration on the source of impulse, and the volume can be radically decreased by lack of attentiveness on the part of the recipient. In the case of visual signs, a recipient can easily shut off his receiving equipment or can redirect it so as to remove himself completely from the reception opportunities of a zone in which he finds himself. This fact, as will be seen later, underlies the practicability of certain kinds of tact. In general, the factors which influence the shape of a zone and the receptivity of a recipient play an important role in habitual communication arrangements.

Communication zones possess an obvious characteristic: at the distance between source of impulse and recipient increases,

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case of visual signs, since they are propagated by waves that are lateral, not spherical.

Some important sign-vehicles involve facial expressions which can be "read" only if all parts of the surface of the face are seen in relation to one another. In such cases the apex of the cone is very narrow, so that the communication zone is effectively reduced to a narrow cylinder. This is also the case where the source of impulse is set into the face and shielded more than ordinary sources of impulse, as in the case of eye expressions.

In the case of relatively intense sound impulses, the angle of propagation approximately describes a circle, and the length of the cone can be taken as the radius of a sphere within which reception of the sign-impulse is possible. With sounds that are less intense, the effectiveness of the body as a barrier apparently varies with the frequency of the sound as well as with its intensity.

the ability of the recipient to receive the message gradually decreases. There is an obvious limit to this.

We frequently find that communication occurs in regions where there is a sharp limit to the simple inverse linear relation between distance from source and receptivity. The region may be bounded to a varying degree by transmission barriers which abruptly reduce the intensity of any sign-impulse that passes through them. The ordinary room perhaps provides the most important example of this kind of communication arrangement, where walls, ceiling, and closed door act as transmission barriers. Regions of this kind may be called bounded regions, and they may be said to vary in the degree to which they are bounded. In certain cases, then, receptivity decreases gradually up to a point and then decreases sharply.

Bounded regions, of course, vary widely according to size, and the kind of communication behavior to be found in a particular community will vary with the kind of bounded regions found in it.

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The chief focus of attention of this study is conversational interaction among persons immediately present to one another. As previously suggested, the exclusion of mediated linguistic communication is somewhat arbitrary and is justifiable on practical grounds rather than on theoretical ones. It is convenient here to make another delimitation of the scope of this study.

It appears that the information that a person conveys (whether he does this in an active or a passive way) can play two different roles and be organized in two different ways. The terms "directed" and "undirected" will be used to refer to these two organizational forms.

Directed information is information which is directed at particular recipients and bears upon a particular conversational issue, a particular object of reference, that is current at the time. This information may be conveyed by linguistic behavior. It may also be conveyed by expressive behavior of the kind we use in qualifying our linguistic statements or in responding in a truncated form to linguistic statements--in other words, the kind of expressive behavior which can be cut sufficiently short so as to add information about and only about the conversational topic of the moment. Obviously, we cannot receive directed information unless we are at the time engaged in actual conversation or in overhearing actual conversation.

Undirected information may be defined as information which is conveyed between persons who are within perceptual range of one another but who are not necessarily involved in actual conversation with one another. When, for example, an individual is engaged in conversational interaction with one cluster of persons, he does not thereby cease to provide a source of impression to those not in the cluster. By the loudness of his voice, or the extravagance of his gestures, he conveys how willing he is to allow persons in clusters other than his own to continue their own conversation without undue distraction. By

his demeanor and his choice of clothes he conveys the degree of respect he feels for the persons in the region and the social occasion that has brought them together. By means of the same behaviors, the individual both intentionally and unwittingly communicates something about his statuses in the wider social worlds which lie beyond the present region and occasion. The individual, further, conveys his status relative to those who are present in the region by participating in one cluster as opposed to another or by not participating in any cluster.[1]

Undirected information, it appears, can only be communicated by means of the expressive component of behavior. Related to this is the fact that undirected information cannot easily be formulated, precisely and consciously, into a specific message; participants have strong feelings about this kind of message (perhaps because it conveys overall conceptions that the sender has about himself and others), but only vague ideas as to what exactly is being communicated.[2]

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[1]At parties hosts tend to feel responsible for seeing that guests "enjoy" themselves and that they "fit" socially with one another. Each type of party has its own rules as to how long a guest can remain unattached to a conversational cluster (or how frequently he may become detached from one) before this lack of involvement in directed communication becomes a sign (transmitted by undirected communication) of the guest's improper relation to the party. At formal dinners there is a rule regarding fair distribution of conversational attention to partner on the right and partner on the left; at dances there are "duty" dances; at informal parties the host frequently has the obligation of engaging unengaged persons in conversation so as to stop undirected communication of the isolate's status.

[2]Perhaps it should be noted that the medium which relies on a sense of smell seems employable for only undirected messages. There are a few exceptions, as, for example, the use of mercaptan in the air tunnels of mines as a sign of a linguistic

It is to be noted that in the kind of directed message where a sender makes a verbal statement to a recipient, the sender can "catch himself" half way through his message and try to modify it in accordance with what he perceives to be the response it is eliciting. If this is not possible, and he finds that his message has elicited a response that he did not wish to elicit, he can hastily add another verbal statement that is calculated to repair the damage. Corrective feedback is possible. Typically, however, this repair work is less possible in the case of inappropriate undirected messages. If a person appears at a social occasion in inappropriate attire, or intoxicated, or in the company of an undesirable person, he cannot hastily correct the unfavorable impression he may make. Often he cannot even "shut up," as he can after conveying an inappropriate directed message, but must go on transmitting the unfavorable message until he leaves the place where interaction is going on.

Undirected messages, unlike directed ones, are not supposed to be conveyed with any particular recipients in mind. Of course, a sender may employ a particular undirected message for the special purpose of influencing a specific recipient, as when a woman "dresses up" for the effect it will have on the man who is courting her. Even in such cases, however, the message

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order that danger is present. The medium which relies on a sense of touch, however, can be employed to convey directed messages--as when one recipient nudges another recipient as a means of commenting upon a particular directed message conveyed by a third person, the sender.

remains the kind that cannot be strictly formulated, and it retains a disguise as a message that is relevant for all persons who happen to come within range of it.

Directed communication frequently takes the form of a rapid exchange, between two talkers, of statements and replies. Rapid and continued give-and-take is, in a sense, the conversational thing about conversation. Undirected communication, on the other hand, is not so clearly a part of interaction and interchange. Frequently a person's undirected messages are merely absorbed into the accumulated impression we have of him, and taken by themselves they frequently do not elicit an overt response from us or, at least, an immediate overt response. It is to be noted, however, that certain undirected messages give rise to an attenuated and sluggish form of "conversational" exchange.[1] If an actor annoys his neighbor by making too much noise or by burning ill-smelling garbage, the neighbor may, when the time is ripe, negatively sanction the actor, conveying the sanction by means of directed or undirected signs; in return the actor may answer with a reprisal or a reparation. However, unlike conversational interaction, exchanges of reprisals and counter-reprisals may be protracted affairs and usually involve only a few exchanges of messages. Parallels between conversational systems and undirected ones will be suggested throughout this report but will not be developed.

Undirected communication plays an important role in our

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[1] Interaction systems of this attenuated kind are not considered in this study.

social life, and yet it has been very little studied. Three important sources of undirected signs may be mentioned. First, there are clothing patterns.[1] This means of conveying one's conception of oneself and one's opinion of the social surroundings has the interesting characteristic of continuous transmission. Except when the sender is taking a bath, in our society, his body is covered (or significantly uncovered) with materials which convey a message to anyone who comes within visual range. Secondly, there are participation patterns. The persons in whose presence an actor is seen, or the persons in whose conversations he could be participating but is not, provide sources of information about the actor. These sources, too, tend to be in continuous transmission, for there are many social situations in which the actor conveys something about himself simply by appearing in the company of no one. Thirdly, there are what might be called "location" patterns. The furnishings and decor of a person's room, office, or place of work; the size, style, and upkeep of his house; the appearance of the land immediately surrounding his house--all these

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[1] A recent illustration of the role of clothing as undirected communication is given by Miller and Form, Industrial Sociology (New York: Harper, 1951), p. 366, in their description of status symbols in a garage:
"This factor of clothing may be carried to a ludicrous degree. In a small garage that the authors studied a wide gamut of clothing symbolized gradations of status. The owner worked in his 'business' suit. The stock and order clerk wore no special uniform but had to remove his coat and worked in his shirt sleeves. The supervisor of the mechanics in the shop also removed his coat, but he wore a very non-functional piece of clothing, a white smock. The mechanics wore full-length blue jumpers, and the apprentices and cleanup men wore overalls or discarded clothing, of darker hues. Although this hierarchy of garb was not formally instituted, it was nonetheless scrupulously observed. No one could presume to rise above his status by wearing the costume "inappropriate" to his job."

are important sources of undirected signs which tell us significant things about him. Like the first-mentioned source of signs, these are in continuous transmission. Unlike clothing and participation patterns, location patterns do not follow the sender around wherever he goes. A potential recipient must come to the place where the sender is habitually located and upon which he has left his mark, and frequently the recipient must gain permission from the sender to do this, before the recipient can avail himself of the information that can be found in such locations.[1]

In Dixon, there are many sources of undirected information that seem to be typical in Western society. For example, almost all adult male crofters have four levels of clothes-finery: rough work clothes; informal indoor clothes; clothes for socials and small parties; clothes for the most important occasions, such as weddings and funerals. Each of these levels is deemed appropriate for a certain range of social occasions (although much the same set of persons may meet each other at occasions in all of the ranges); inappropriate dress is considered an affront to those who perceive it and to the social occasion in which it occurs. So, also, a man in Dixon who does not have a "clean" shave conveys thereby a slight disrespect for the persons and institutions with which he has dealings.

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[1]In Britain a very important source of undirected information is found in speech patterns. Range of vocabulary, volume and pitch of sound, dialect, intonation, accent--all these signs help to place a person socially and regionally, even though the recipient overhears only a snatch of the linguistic message that is being communicated. Like clothing patterns, this form of undirected communication follows the sender wherever he goes; unlike clothing patterns, speech patterns are not in continuous transmission--a speaker can shut up.

Because Dixon is a rural community that is small in geographical size and uncluttered with communication barriers such as trees, some communication problems arise in connection with undirected signs. The state of one's crops and the size of one's stock are physically present for everyone to see. This possibility is increased by the custom of many crofters of carrying around or having in the house a small pocket telescope. Thus an important aspect of one's wealth cannot be concealed from others. This makes it difficult for crofters to practise strategies that members of other occupational groups often employ, namely, overestimating one's wealth in some circumstances, concealing it in others, and underestimating it in still others. Nor can one crofter conceal from another the stage he has reached in the annual work cycle or the tactics he is employing in performing the basic croft tasks. Thus, for example, errors of judgment or lack of work skill cannot be concealed. The two fishing crews find themselves in the same position. More than half the members of the community are in a position to observe directly the times when the boats put out and the times when the boats do not. Crews that go out in bad weather have no protection from residents who judge such action to be unwise. Crews that do not put out in bad weather have no way of concealing this face from residents and must face the scorn of ex-sailors. So, also, the exact catch of one boat can be seen and compared with the catch obtained by another boat, or the catch that should have been made. Large catches bring claims from creditors and friends; small catches bring judgments of low ability. The crofter and the

fisherman thus have little informational control over their work.[1]

The fact that a crofter must do much of his work in the open, before the eyes of the community, as it were, tends to throw into clear relief any social change that occurs in regard to crofting customs. As soon as one crofter makes an innovation, others find that they become identified as persons who do or do not use the new technique. Thus the last fifteen years has seen a radical shift in plowing techniques, a shift from the use of horses to the use of tractors. Apparently those in the vanguard of the change fifteen years ago were as clearly marked out in the community for this fact as are those who today still use horses. Since the crofter, during the last fifty years, has been moving from the status of a peasant-tenant to the status of an independent progressive farmer, the visible ownership and use of costly modern capital goods is a means of saying something and having something said as well as a means of doing something.

Another illustration of the interplay between social change and conditions of undirected communication in Dixon may be seen in the changing conceptions as regards the work day. Traditionally the number of hours worked in a day was determined by the urgency of the task in the current phase of the croft work cycle, by the availability of light to work by, and by the fitness of the weather. During the dark winter days, when the sun rises at about ten and sets at about three-thirty, crofters sometimes stay in bed, where it is warm, until eleven or twelve in

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[1]The importance of this kind of control for the self-protection of the worker is brought out nicely in Donald Roy, op. cit.

the morning, and, except for regular chores such as feeding the stock and doing repairs, not much is done by the menfolk. During the other seasons, basic croft tasks, such as lambing, casting of peats, plowing, and sowing, which have to be accomplished within the right calendar period, may keep a crofter and his family working as many hours as they are physically capable of. It was not rare for crofters to rise at three o'clock during the lambing season, and at four o'clock during the peat-casting season. It was not rare for hay to be raked and stacked by moonlight. However, apparently in connection with increasing government employment and increasing government regulation of working hours, an eight-hour-day conception of work is becoming more prevalent. This day stops on Sunday, holidays, and Wednesday afternoon, but it does not vary according to the season or the clemency of the weather. Fewer and fewer crofters are now working after their six o'clock supper, although, during June and July, there is frequently enough light to work all night long. There is a feeling that it is improper for persons to work in the evening. Similarly, there seems to be a tendency to be more and more selfconscious about staying abed all through the morning in wintertime. Winter mornings are coming more and more to be defined as times when it is improper not to be up and around. In other words, the hours between eight in the morning and six at night on weekdays are coming not only to be more and more common as the period when one is working, but this time period is coming more and more to be defined as the time when, and only when, men ought to be engaged in work. Failure to be seen working during this time, or perceived

attempts to work during other times, are coming more and more to be felt as something which gives the community a bad name.

Interestingly enough, Wednesday afternoon off, which those who work in the shops or for the government enjoy, is apparently still felt to be a slightly improper luxury; the young clerks who choose to spend that afternoon in visible recreational pursuits seem to do so with feelings of selfconsciousness and even feelings of guilt. So, too, Wednesday night, which has traditionally been a time for socials and festivities--a sort of duplication of what also occurs on Saturday night--does not yet seem to have succumbed to standard Anglo-American definitions of Wednesday night.

It may also be noted that specialized communication services are also influenced by the perception range characteristic of undirected communication in Dixon. If a telegram is delivered to anyone, many persons in the neighborhood can see that this has taken place, and soon the whole community knows that an important event has occurred in the family to which the message was delivered. Similarly, the shape of packages delivered by the postman can be seen by many persons, although the package itself is not violated. If a package shaped like a bottle of whiskey is delivered to someone, many others soon know that this has occurred.[1] All of these sources of undirected communication con-

[1]For a handful of persons in the community, drinking is thought by others to be a "problem." The chief postman cooperates with the disapproved drinkers by delivering their whiskey packages by car personally, thus eliminating undirected signs conveyed by packages. Of course, this double delivery service is known of, and the appearance of the postman's car outside certain cottages is itself taken as a sign of a whiskey delivery.

tribute to the feeling that many crofters express that Dixon is a fine place but everyone knows too much about everyone else.