

5

Deconstructing Information

Lee Thayer

This chapter raises some “meta—” questions about the concept of “information” itself. Where “information” is presumed to be relevant to the workings of the human world, there is the question of the communicability of whatever is described as “information.” This places what is presumed to be informative—whether natural or human-made—in a system which is itself nondecomposable. In a nondecomposable (human communication) system, what we call “information” cannot be described apart from that system—is a function of that system, and cannot be empirically independent of it. The “problematics” that this flaw in our concept of “information” leave in its wake include those of description, of order, of limits, of power, of meaning, and of “communication.” While such systems may appear to be decomposable (reducible) to an observer (the “psychologist’s” or “third-person fallacy”), there is no “information” which is infinitely transportable. Whether something can be “information” or not, and what kind of “information” it is construed to be, is a function of the irreducible system—the story—which the humans involved imagine themselves to be in. All “information” is therefore “deconstructed” information.

One problem with the notion of “information” is, of course, that the system in which it occurs is not decomposable.

That is, information is what it is only because it occurs in the system it

occurs in. The "same" information, perceived as vital in one system, may be irrelevant in another—or even malignant.

We may speak about it in the abstract. But what we talk about when we talk about "information" is no part of the empirical world.

We could certainly say this about anything we talk about: The concept is not the same as the stuff we imagine we are talking about.

To speak of bulls, the Spanish proverb has it, is not the same as to be in the bullring.

Even so, there is something *especially* sticky about the notion of "information."

It seems unlikely that we would get much argument if we suggested that speaking of love is not the same as loving. To make the word "love" with voice or pen is not the same as making love.

We acknowledge the difference; it is not problematic.

But the difference between the "information" of which we might speak and the "information" which we posit to be "there" seems to evaporate. We assume an identity between them.

Conceptually, we have assumed that the system in which specific "information" obtains is decomposable. It is not.

The unit of analysis is the system. Information, thus, could never be an independent variable, transportable from system to system. Sherlock Holmes' great advantage was that he understood "information" to be system-specific.

Our disadvantage is that we don't.

To conceive of "information" as system-independent is to make it, and our mission, unnecessarily problematic.

Let us not be frugal. That's but *one* problem with the notion of "information." There are several others.

Let us feast upon them, for the time it takes to tell. And for the advantage that might lie in doing so. It won't do to mislead ourselves about what we imagine ourselves to be up to.

Describing

One might, indeed, imagine that there are two quite distinct paradigms. Two mind-sets or *mentalités*. If so, one might also imagine that this is where they come to clash.

You see the problem. (Or at least this way of "seeing" it.) If you have to stand in the common paradigm to address the uncommon one, you deny the uncommon one by how you talk about it. If you stand in the uncommon paradigm, what you say doesn't make much sense to those who are standing in (who *understand* from within) the common one.

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Which is to say that, no matter how adequate or inadequate our descriptions may be, they do not so much lead us into the "truth" as into our future. What we say about things is always more consequential than referential.

But that, too, pretends to be descriptive. As someone once observed, it is difficult to get someone to understand something if his paycheck (or in this case, his paradigm) depends upon his not understanding it.

Are we (merely) *describing* what is? Or are we *constructing* what is and thus what will be? Is that question somewhere around the crux of the problematic? Or is that notion, being rather central to the common paradigm, the sort of notion that could only move us in the uncommon one?

Paradoxes abound. There is thus no informed way of getting from the common to the uncommon paradigm. Paradox is no part of "information."

Perhaps this is partly what Abraham Heschel [1965, p. 8] had in mind when he wrote, "Thus the truth of a theory about man is either creative or irrelevant, but never merely descriptive." If the theory—or even the "facts"—about us are not irrelevant, then they alter us. We become what we say about ourselves.

But so do our facts and theories about things alter us. What we conceive to be an aspect of the world beyond us is necessarily an aspect of that with which we conceive: mind. So it is impossible to describe the world without describing ourselves—if in no other way, invariably as those who do the describing.

To speak of "information" is to define ourselves as that creature capable of informing and being informed.

This does not say there is such a thing as "information." It creates us as purveyors of and believers in "information." We are who we are because "it" is what we say it is.

The question is not so much, "What is information?" It is more like "What are people to be, having made such a thing as 'information' an aspect of their lives?"

Order

Sense requires order. Or the two may be, perhaps, the same thing.

If you can't put something into some kind of order, it is not likely to make sense to you. Something as nonsensical as the ABCs makes sense to us because B follows A before C. Try it some other way.

Or, "Love and marriage (used to) go together like horse and carriage." The carriage, like marriage, follows. If the carriage gets before the horse, we may conclude that something is wrong—meaning that there is something that doesn't make sense to me (us).

It could well be, as the biologist D'Arcy Thompson once suggested, that things are the way they are because they got to be that way. But that won't do. The mind, which emerges in order, expects order. If it isn't there, or can't be readily assumed, then what we apprehend is either incomprehensible or we must fit it into *some* context, some order of things.

When Einstein said that the mystery of the universe is its comprehensibility, he was of course referring to the order that mind, which "knows" it, must be composed of, and which it must impose upon that universe, to exist.

Thus that about which we might inform ourselves depends upon the ways in which we—which is to say, our mindfulness of the world—has been in-formed.

What we get out of James's "booming, buzzing confusion" or Freud's chaos is an in-formed world. This is the world that correlates with nothing better than the ways in which our minds have been in-formed to take that world into account.

"Information," then, is the name we give to whatever happens to ratify the mind/world or extends it in some (for some particular set of minds) orderly way.

This is "creative," in Heschel's sense, because both the mind and the world it "knows" must be reconstructed on an hourly/daily basis.

We institutionalize the ordered world as best and as much as we can. We do so in order not to have to be forever testing "its" comprehensibility—any shortfall in which would be a threat to our way of minding the world.

A cosmology (universally it would seem the first of human attempts to order the world and thus give birth and trajectory to the mind [Snell, 1953; Radin, 1927]) is but one grand way of institutionalizing orderliness. Structuring everyday life (Braudel, 1979) and numbers and lists (Goody, 1977) are examples of how the institutionalization of orderliness has evolved.

What is institutionalized requires no thought, no uncertainty. We are so well in-formed with respect to the usual order of lights at an electric signal that even colorblind people can manage it: red, yellow, green.

The question is: what goes with what, what precedes or what follows what, what is the sequence of events, what "causes" what, what justifies what? These "orders" are so built into our minding of the world that we do not see them for what they are.

Something happens. A floor creaks. We consider the "cause." Since it has just turned much colder, that would "explain" the happening.

It may have been a burglar. But if we "explain" the happening otherwise, then there is, for all practical purposes, no burglar. If there were a burglar, we'd be doing something about the burglary going on. Bishop Berkeley explained all this.

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So the “information” is more a function of the order we impose than it is of the event—which event would be, without such ordering as we may impose upon it, meaningless, because unapprehended, incomprehensible, unordered.

What is incomprehensible cannot be said to be very informative, one way or the other, about itself. It could still be very informative, perhaps, for making some orderly description of the mind(s) for whom it was incomprehensible. This is the anthropologists’ dilemma: In Schopenhauer’s words, “What Peter tells me about Paul tells me more about Peter than it does about Paul.” But even this is the case only if it is easier to “read” Peter (the tenuousness of ethnography) than it is to “read” Paul.

“Information,” then, must take the path of least resistance. That is, we do not typically avoid the easy explanation so as to pit ourselves against the difficult or even the impossible one.

Either our minds are some function of what is, or what is is some function of our minding of it. Or both.

“Information,” then, is some function of the correlation. It can’t be something else.

There is another angle on this matter of order.

Physicist David Bohm’s notion of implicate order (1980) suggests, for those of us interested in such things as “information,” that something is what it is because something else is what it is. Leaving aside the advantages this might have for problems connected with quantum physics, the heuristic it may provide for anything that may involve human “information” is that a mind is what it is because the world it comprehends is what it is.

This would make the knower and the known, as Dewey put it, two aspects of the same thing.

What informs us is whatever we are informable about. Or, “information” is therefore the link between what we know and what we know it with.

“Information” thus describes the “connection” between a mind or set of minds that “knows” something and the something which is known. It is what underwrites the claim to “knowing.” Or to “seeing”—as in “I can see that.”

Possible “information” is thus a measure of the system that is struck by a knower or set of knowers and a known.

Limits

“Information” could not have been, could not be, a problem for people of traditional societies.

Their truths were given. The task was to maintain them.

Our truths have to be "discovered," as the scientizers sometimes put it.

It is no coincidence that it is only in cultures that believe in an infinitely expanding universe that there could be such a thing as an "information explosion."

Parkinson may have suggested something more than suspected. "Information" expands to fill the reaches of a people's universe.

The "word" was at one time considered magical. What could be done with words was considered wondrous. At the same time, terrifying. Worlds could be made with words. But, once made, could not be stopped with mere words.

There was thus a sense that what ought not be done with words (or any other form of mental artifact) was as important as what could be done with words.

There were limits.

There was a certain pragmatism in those limits. The American Indian child was raised to understand talk/words/"information" as follows: Make sure, before you open your mouth to speak (or ready your word processor to print, presumably), that what you are going to say will add to the beauty that already exists in the world.

The idea was that "information" was not seen as the path to anything. Rather, what didn't fit the right path could not be spoken of.

Limits.

Our notion is that the more "information" we have, the closer we must be getting to the "truth" about this or that.

We pollute. We decimate the forests: 75,000 trees to make but one Sunday *New York Times*. We imagine the trade-off to be worthy—probably necessary, so that we may be "informed."

We pollute—the land, the air, hearts, minds—we can't be concerned. We are junkies, "information" addicts, and we have to have our fix.

We fill the world with "information," supposing, perhaps, that that is a reasonable substitute for what is destroyed to make "it."

"Information" is thus a kind of cancer, a reasonably useful tool run amok. We maximize, imagining the "answer" to be in the glut. We can no longer discern a benign from a malignant "bit."

A world of infinitely expanding "information" is a mindless world, held together only by "information."

Our "reach" exceeds our "grasp."

Our minds are "blown."

A limitless world is a world unsuitable for human habitation.

No matter. The engine of "progress" is "information."

What makes games fun is that they have limits: they end, somebody wins. This game is ceasing to be fun for most people.

We could ask them, but that would just generate more "information."

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Power could (usefully) be understood as the prerogative to explain things.

The gods had it. Kings and queens had it. Popes used to have it. As did teachers, preachers, even parents.

Now, perhaps, only muggers and terrorists and bosses—and the latter only if it's the only job one can get.

Locate the power and you have located the soul and the destiny of a civilization.

For us, power lies in "information." It is where "the answers" are. It is where we go to supplicate. It is our Mecca.

The Romans did us no favor by making something like "information" possible apart from the person who was its mother, apart from the person who brought it into existence and was therefore responsible for it.

It was appropriate that the messenger, before this gift of the Romans, was killed. The "information" died with the messenger.

"Information" thus dilutes power, shifts power from the one in power to the "information" itself. We would have killed it if we had known that this is where power would come to rest.

People no longer explain. There is no longer someone in charge. There is no longer a visionary, a leader. There is only "information."

What it "tells" us, we must do.

Economic "information" drives the economy. "Information" about the sentiments of the voters drives politics. We used to drive our own cars; now "information," better at it than we, intercedes.

If we are "hollow men," as Eliot said, it is because we no longer have power over ourselves, or the course of our lives. What can't be reduced to "information" doesn't exist.

Whatever exists, exists as "information." We are all "waiting for Godot." A birth announcement is as good as a birth. "We regret to inform you . . ." will call forth reactions that may have at one time been ours to give only to the "real" thing.

In a world where a description of a soda is the "real thing," we ourselves may be less than "real."

It is only where people know themselves to be impotent that they can fantasize that an "information" device like a lap-top can give them "power."

"Information" is power, we say. We should know. The more we depend upon "it," the less it returns the power to us. It raises our victimage to a sense of being empowered only by "information."

The problem with Paradise (at least our version of it) was that the two people involved were overdetermined.

Our appetite for "information," boundless, returns us to that state.

What we invented now invents us. To paraphrase Churchill, we shape our "information," then our "information" shapes us.

That's power. Yet here is no one to kill, no one to depose.

Meaning

Yet another "problem" with our modern concept of "information" is that it obscures a relatively important empirical phenomenon—which might otherwise constitute . . . what, "counter-information"?

What gets obscured is that the mind deals only in meanings. The mind does not deal in "information." It is not capable of dealing in "information."

The stuff of the mind is meaning. The world that it may therefore apprehend is also a world of meanings.

Meanings are *human* artifacts. They do not exist in nature. As von Foerster says [1981, p. 263], "The environment contains no information." It is what we can give to something that informs us, not what it can give us. Aquinas said, "Each receives according to his (or her) capacity."

It isn't "information" that capacitates us. We capacitate "information." But differentially.

People are not interchangeable with respect to "information." "Information" cannot be "conveyed" to someone who is not capable of informing that "information."

The dark side of "information" is that it fits only into a transitive world. Given an intransitive world—the world of the receiver, the human world—"information" becomes a byproduct of mind, rather than the other way around.

Do you find that meaningful? If not, there is something problematic about our concept of "information."

What is it, exactly, that makes a list of nonsense syllables meaningful to a particular person, a crisis of the environment not?

Collingwood says that something is meaningful to the extent that a person can ask the question to which that something can be taken as an answer.

What is the question, that "information" may constitute the answer?

Communication

Luhmann [1990, p. 10] says that "information" is "an internal change of state, a self-produced aspect of communicative events and not something that exists in the environment. . . ."

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Well, yes. But what he's assuming is what constitutes the problematic for the great many who want to conceive of or concern themselves with "information." To take "information" out of *some* "communicative event" and conceptually thereby to render it into something *sui generis* contributes mightily to this problematic.

By "self-produced," Luhmann must intend to make "information" a function of the mind of the person who claims it, and not a function of the source.

It's all metaphor, as Nietzsche said. We can do useful things by pretending that the references of our representations are "objective." But this illusion works only if one is surrounded by others who take the world into account in a fundamentally similar way.

That's "objectification": two or more minds can deny their subjectivity by colluding in making that of which they speak (or think) "objective." This is the lesson of Wittgenstein's shoe box.

But to make the stuff with which we "objectify" the world an aspect of that world creates a cancerlike problematic that can only become more pervasive and thus more insoluble.

Not that we would want to "solve" it. In a culture where most of the growth comes from problematics, who is to deny employment dedicated to increasing them?

However *that* may be, what is conceptually challenging here is that "information" is an irreducible, nondecomposable product of a specific communication *system*. Not of a communication *event*, for that may make the "information" appear to be transportable.

But a *system*.

Systems

Even here the paradigms come to clash.

For the system at issue is not the "objective" one. It is the "subjective" one.

The "world" is the world in mind. And this, however we may manifest it or "objectify" it, remains "subjective." When it comes to "Show-and-Tell," as Wittgenstein averred, I can tell you what's "on" my mind. But I can't show "it" to you.

And "information" is mind-stuff. It is not a property of that about which we speak, of that which exists in our "minding" of "it."

So the system of which "it" is a property is a cognitive system undergoing change.

We can't extract the "information" because it is not a property of the material world. It is a property of a cognitive system.

That we can call something "information" is no more remarkable than the commonplace of calling a particular location of the sun with respect to the earth a "sunset." It is neither more remarkable nor more "scientific," whatever *that* metaphor may mean.

Nor is it special. It is a metaphor. We have simply forgotten that, like a sunset, that is what it is. And in our lust to be literal, we have abdicated the empirical fact that, in our minding of it, that is all it *can* be.

The mind deals only in metaphors—only in raising what may *be* to the level of what can be said of it. The proposition that "the limits of my world are the limits of my communicability" (Wittgenstein again) was not intended to exclude "information."

If we were to exclude "information" from such limits, we would thereby remove it from the world to which it belongs. With "information" as with everything else, when we apprehend "it," we transform it from what it "is" to what we may be capable of saying of it.

That transform is from no-story to story. The system of which all "information" is a property is ultimately a kind of "story." It is the story—or some part of a story—within which that "information" informs.

The story is the thing. All the rest is complicity. That "information" which is not complicit, in this sense, is nothing because it is no part of the story.

A story is the sort of thing where one thing is related by relating to another thing, which itself is related to another thing, and so on.

The "and so on" is a sign in a story. If it "informs," that is because the story is engaged.

So "information" is the next line in the script of the story which is being made up as we go along.

If it isn't that, "it" is irrelevant.

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