Chapter 1
Communication, Information, and Pragmatics

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors first examine the meaning and significance of information, which will entail a critique of Shannon information theory. They show it is really a theory of the transmission of signals. They describe how MacKay and Bateson adds the element of meaning to the definition of information. They then examine the proposition of Kauffman et al. that organization is a form of information. Assuming that it is not possible not to communicate, the authors emphasize the pragmatic dimension of communication. They argue that information, communication, and social interaction are inseparable elements of production of meaning. Thus, as in any communication there are three simultaneous dimensions operating as a system—syntactic, semantics, and pragmatics—and it is also the case that information, communication, and social interaction are operating as a system.

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this article is to clarify the relationship between communication and information by considering pragmatics. Although these terms are closely related, they are not the same. In order for communication to occur the information that is transmitted must be processed within the social context of the sender and the receiver or in other words through the use of pragmatics. That is, there is no communication between the sender and the receiver if the receiver does not understand the information sent by the sender. Information before it is interpreted is therefore nothing more than the signal. It only becomes communication, if it is properly interpreted by the receiver of the information. And it is only through the context or the pragmatics that the receiver can understand the intended meaning of the sender and therefore as a result communication can take place. Misinterpretation leads to miscommunication. As no interpretation is perfect as pragmatics between the sender and the receiver is never perfect the content of

the communication depends on the user and the user's interpretation, which McLuhan formulated with his iconic one-liner *the user is the content*. In actuality the sender, the receiver and their understanding of each other are all part of the content.

BACKGROUND

The context in which the information is interpreted is the only way that the meaning that was intended by the sender can be understood by the receiver, but the meaning that the receiver attaches to the information sent by the sender will always vary to some degree (Chan, Walker & Gleaves, 2015; Gibbs et al, 2015; Gui & Argentin, 2011; Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000). Because the 'user is the content' all communication is miscommunication to a certain degree. Perfect communication is an ideal that all communicators strive to achieve through the art of rhetoric. To sum up what we have just posited: information is required for communication but does not necessarily result in communication and never results in perfect communication. The extra ingredient that is required to transform information into communication is context or pragmatics, which is never perfect. Recent methodological innovations try to account for the pragmatics on digital environments (Boyd and Crawford, 2012; Hine, 2005; Lee and Chen, 2015).

In this article we will first examine the meaning and significance of information, which will entail a critique of Shannon Information Theory. We will show it is really a theory of the transmission of signals. We describe how MacKay and Bateson with their respective formulations of "information is the distinction that makes a difference (MacKay, 1969)" and "information is the difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1973)" adds the element of meaning to the definition of information. We then examine the proposition of Kauffman, Logan et al. (2007) that organization is a form of information and that life entails the propagation of organization.

Assuming that it is not possible not to communicate, we emphasize the pragmatic dimension of communication. We argue that 'information,' 'communication' and 'social interaction' are inseparable elements of production of meaning, even if analytically they can be conceived as independent concepts. Thus, as in any communication there are three simultaneous dimensions operating as a system – syntactic, semantics and pragmatics, and it is also the case that 'information,' 'communication' and 'social interaction' are operating as a system. In this sense, speech acts owe their meaning to performances in the context of what information the sender sends, the interpretation of the receiver and the social context that exists between the sender and the receiver. We argue that, from the differential emphasis on the syntactic, semantic or pragmatic dimensions of communication, lies a major difference between models for the theory of communication: communication as transmission of information or communication as a relational activity.

Information: From Origins to Shannon's Information Theory

The English word information according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) first appears in the written record in 1386 by Chaucer. It is derived from Latin through French by combining the word "inform" meaning "giving a form to the mind" with the ending "ation" denoting a noun of action. This earliest definition refers to information as an item of training or molding of the mind. Information is not an object but a process of forming or informing the mind.

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