

Author: Schouten, Dirk.

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Dirk Schouten

REAL COMMUNICATION WITH AUDIOVISUAL MEANS

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It is also an appendix to the book: "Media Action Projects: A Model for Integrating Video in Project-based Education, Training and Community Development". It is published by the University of Nottingham, England in 1998. See the Video in Education Website (<http://utopia.knoware.nl/users/schoutdi>).

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INTRODUCTION

When you are dealing with books, looking at paintings, analysing papers, or studying films, you have a theory (a set of thoughts) which you set next to the text as you work. Or, to put it differently, you have a viewpoint from which you consider the book or the film. That theory has various open and hidden assumptions; about us as spectators, about the product to be analysed and finally assumptions about mankind and nature in general. Sometimes it is difficult to identify these assumptions or to keep them “up front” while you are working, but that is only a temporary difficulty, since you can always be sure that the assumptions are there. These assumptions are often as “natural” to us as water is to fish. When asked about it, they tell you they have never heard of water. These theories are also known as ‘rock-bottom assumptions’, ‘paradigms’, ‘basic beliefs’, ‘world-view’, etc.

AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA

When you are producing media, you also use ‘a’ theory. A set of thoughts or instruments that have the ‘appropriate’ assumptions for you in your work. This theory acts as a constant frame of reference for you as you work on the making of a programme. And, of course, you as a facilitator working with groups will also need to have a clear understanding of that theory and how it relates to and supports the work of your students. When a group wants to make a powerful documentary on school life or women’s rights, for example, where do they get their theories from? Of course, during research they will probably be dealing with theories on education and/or women’s rights and maybe on research itself. But when they have developed a thesis and they want to make a program about it, what then? What set of assumptions are they going to draw on to help them get their argument across clearly to their audiences? Here the problem of the ‘proper’ or ‘right’ theory begins.

Or if a group want to make a powerful video on how a sewage worker plants a bomb in the treatment works because he has discovered that factories have been pumping cancerous material through it, what theoretical framework will they draw on to make the project work

well? Should it be a tear-jerking documentary rather than a drama? And should they start by studying how documentaries are made or by looking at theories of dramatic cinema, or theories on social action, or basic beliefs in communication? Maybe, but there are other considerations too.

When you want to produce programs with media, media theories are not immediately useful. They may conceivably help you to decide what to do, but not necessarily how to do it, or why to choose one way rather than another. You need a theory, or at least a set of assumptions that come before the media theory. Before we concern ourselves with media theory we need to look at the issues of communication, the most basic principles on how to make your meanings clear to others and how they, in turn, can make their position clear to you.

The media are (by their definition) in-between the people involved in such exchanges. They are something that stands between you and the others and, while there are undoubtedly advantages to this, there are also some drawbacks.

Media communication is different to everyday communication between people. You are dealing with audiences and viewers whose attitudes to listening and watching media have been heavily influenced by their experiences of watching television, listening to the radio, and so on. It is quite conceivable that your video will not fit the viewing pattern the audience has built up during a lifetime of watching television and in this way your programmes can miss a target audience if the audience does not understand your way of communication. It can even be argued that television has had such a profound influence on audiences' expectations that you are better to avoid video altogether and concentrate on less common media such as tape-slide, but since the trend towards video is still so strong we must try to come to terms with these difficulties about audiences and their viewing habits.

The most obvious solution might be to try and match our programs to the general viewing experiences of the audience: to give them what they are used to. But there are problems with this. Most television output is created in conditions which are inappropriate to our task of helping groups explore, explain, understand and react to issues within their real communities. We need an approach which will not try merely to match the program to the

conventional 'viewing' experiences of the audience, but which will let programme makers join the viewers themselves in their overall experience of the issue (not just as viewers but as people, as complete human being).

Watzlawick's theory on human communication is of use here for he identifies different levels of communication between people. Every communication, Watzlawick proposes, has a content-aspect and a relation-aspect. He means that every communication conveys not just its content, but also the way in which the content should be understood. He calls the first aspect, the content, 'communication', and the second level, the relation aspect 'meta-communication'. Meta-communication is an important concept for us, not least because it helps to classify the 'communication'.

For example, when I say to you: "Shut the door", the content level is simple and unproblematic. I can also ask "Shut the door" or "Shut the door" or "SHUT THE DOOR!". In all cases the content of the message is the same. But in all four examples the meta level of the content differs. The first one can be rather neutral, the second one can be said to someone who forgets to shut the door, causing the wind to blow away my papers. The third one is for someone who always forgets to shut doors and the last one can be said by someone who has said it already a hundred times during that particular day.

This distinction between communication levels is worth attention. It can remind us how programme makers should recognise and be explicit about their meta level of communication and should point out their relation to the content they supply. By understanding this relation, by recognising the programme-makers' own position and interests, the viewers are put into a position where they also develop their relation to the content. Because of the huge amount of audio-visual material already available to audiences this clarity is essential.

Our audience will be accustomed to coming across programmes on this (and other subjects) which are fundamentally different from each other in a number of respects. They will have seen programmes with similar content but different 'meta-communicative' aims. For example, compare a documentary program on a racial issue from the South African Television in 1975 with a program on racial issues from the Dutch VPRO Television (a left

wing broadcaster) in about the same year. You can see the same black communities, but the programs conveys completely different messages. Or, another possibility, the audience will have seen other programs with similar aims but different contents. Have a look at two commercials for washing powder, for example. And, to complete this variety, they will have come across programs which are different in their content and their aims. Most likely that your type of programs can be put under this last category.

By making their own communication (their content) and their meta- communication (the way they want their content understood and in that way their relation to the audience) as clear as possible, programme makers reduce the risk that they and their work will be dismissed as unreal, foolish, deceitful or unnecessarily biased. This can happen very easily. On one international course a group of students from a Dutch Polytechnic could not understand a program that was made by a similar group of students from an English University. The subject was the same, the course was the same and the way the programs were made was also the same. Lack of understanding of meta levels (context, differences in involvement, differences in connotation, different perspectives on the same subject, cultural differences) made the Dutch students reject certain parts of the English programs.

Many factors could lead to audiences dismissing the programmes simply because they seem to appear to be of a different order than the viewers or listeners are accustomed to. It is by recognising, and considering these aspects of their work that groups can try to join the experiences of their audience not just as viewers (which suggests eyes with no brains attached) but as people.

The main weakness with Watzlawick however, is that he is concerned mainly with the production side of communication; he only deals with the one who speaks. It is a supply-side model, dealing (like much media theory) more with the communicators' side than that of the receptionists.

A solid theory on communication should not only see both sides as equally important, but should also include the program makers themselves. In addition his concentration on the distinction between communication and meta-communication leaves no room for considerations of truth and how to question it. Maybe this is because Watzlawich was

mainly concerned with 'distorted' communication; with psychiatric cases, with schizophrenia and related psychological problems. Watzlawick was not dealing with 'normal' everyday communication.

Watzlawick's theory is fine as far as it goes, but for a more sophisticated analysis of communication and its problems and possibilities, it is worth turning to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and his Theory of Communicative Action. His is a sound theory on communication which operates without notions of media, although they can easily be incorporated (as Habermas clearly demonstrates in his Second Volume, p. 389-395).

Moreover, it offers a theoretical base (the rock bottom theory, the basic assumptions) for handling group processes and it can serve as an instrument for critical evaluation of programmes by the makers, the participants and the target group. Considering audio-visual programmes through theories of language and action (like Habermas's) helps us to overcome the inherent weaknesses of media theories.

Habermas divides speech acts (what someone says) into two principle categories. There are Strategic Actions (speech acts which make people do things) and Communicative Actions (speech acts which are designed to arrive at a common understanding of a situation). He thinks that Communicative Actions are more appropriate than Strategic Actions for reaching an understanding, promoting emancipation or improving relations between people. He also is convinced that we should make more room for them in our everyday and our political lives (for a convincing but also difficult work, see: J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, Polity Press, London, 1996)

Habermas's work is often considered to be inaccessible but there are some summaries of it which are helpful to us. Stephen K. White, for example, describes Habermas' claims that the speech acts of communicatively competent actors conform to a set of rules:

Such rules describe the competence an actor has for using sentences in utterances aimed at reaching an understanding. As the analysis of speech acts since J. L. Austin has shown, speakers, in saying something, also do something. This doing of something is what Austin called the 'illocutionary force' of an utterance. Habermas wants to argue that the universal core of the many and varied things speakers do in uttering sentences is to situate those strings of symbols in a system of validity claims. When a speaker orients himself toward understanding – that is engages in communicative action - his speech acts must raise, and he must be accountable for, three rationality or "validity claims" (Geltungsansprüche): truth, normative legitimacy and truthfulness/authenticity. Only if a speaker is able to convince his hearers that his claims are

rational and thus worthy of recognition can there develop a “rationally motivated agreement” (Einverständnis) or consensus on how to coordinate future actions.

From the perspective of communicative action, utterances can be assessed as rational or irrational because they raise criticizable validity claims, that is, ones which are fallible and open to objective judgement...

In developing the ability to speak and act, each individual acquires the know-how required both to differentiate the three dimensions of validity and to employ the standards appropriate to each dimension for the purpose of assessing particular claims. For a given agent this know-how may be more or less conscious, but it is always intuitively accessible. (S.K. White, pp. 28/9) The recent work of Jürgen Habermas, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 28/9)

Habermas’s writings benefit from perseverance and we shall summarise some of them here before considering their relevance to communicating with video.

Speech acts, according to Habermas contain a propositional and a performative part (like Watzlawick and Austin, he believes that when we say something we also do something.)

The propositional part indicates a state of affairs in reality. For example: “The average income of farmers in South America is just 87 dollars per annum”. The performative part implies or indicates how the propositional part needs to be understood (in this case “The speaker thinks this is disgraceful”). In that way one can categorise or question something. An audience can respond: “I think that is disgraceful, too.” Or: “Why do you think it disgraceful?” Or: “I see what you mean, but...”

In fact a speaker, by saying something, not only says something that is true to her, but also says: “I claim the communicative right towards you to have an opinion and to say it to you in this defined situation”. The performative part defines the boundaries of the communicative action. It marks out the (communicative) context of the (propositional) content. It makes clear which relation the speaker wants to make to their audience. As long as the participants are aimed at reaching mutual agreement, a communicative situation is shaped, because the speaker makes three “validity claims” with their speech act:

1. They claim that they are speaking the truth in the propositional part of the speech act;
2. they claim normative legitimacy concerning the communicative act in a smaller sense (the performative part); and
3. they claim truthfulness/authenticity concerning the intentions and emotions they express.

These validity claims the speaker makes can, in principle, be criticised, although in practice this possibility is often blocked. In communicative action the hearers can (if they wish) demand reasons from the speakers to justify their validity claims.

What has this to do with the things that programme makers do? Our particular interest here is in documentary work or programmes that show one or another factual reality. Well firstly we can safely say that such a programme can be seen as a claim from the makers on truth, normative legitimacy and authenticity. When we look at the mainstream of programs, these are all apparently communicated to the audience. In reality though, the possibility to criticise is systematically blocked most of the time. In a conversation, on the other hand, the participants continually change roles as sender and receiver. During an audiovisual program that is not possible, you are forced in the role of listener or audience and it is very difficult to give feedback or opinions to programme makers. Now a strange thing happens. Instead of dealing extra carefully and openly with the three validity claims, nearly all conventional programmes ignore or conceal them.

The medium of television appears to speak the truth. A fact is considered to be really true when it has been on television. In the French media messages appeared that Isabelle Adjani (a French singer) was dead. People only believed the opposite when she appeared on television. More recently (in October 1993) a technician for Sky Television in London saw an obituary being updated for the Queen Mother. Not knowing that this was a routine procedure he phoned his mother in Australia to tell her the news. She contacted the local radio station and the news started to circulate as “real”, before it occurred to someone to check the details with the UK.

Even programme makers can fall victim to this illusion that audio-visual programmes automatically speak the truth. They can also find it easy to hide behind the medium and the conventional processes of producing their material. Conventional broadcast material is made within institutions which ensure that none of those who contribute to the work is seen as responsible for the content or form of the programme. So, who can the audience turn to when they want to challenge it on the grounds of truth, normative legitimacy or authenticity?

Even claims on truth (the most direct of these) can cause great problems in programmes. A clear example is the nature documentary “White Wilderness” by Walt Disney. It is a nature film on the wildlife on the North Pole. In it we see lemmings, due to overpopulation, start a gigantic migration, that ends with the death of a lot of animals when they jump off the rocks into the ice-cold polar sea. This massive suicide is portrayed as a biological mechanism for survival of the species. This clear example therefore is often used in biology teaching.

Recently it became clear (Volkskrant (Dutch newspaper), 12th April 1986) that the scene of the migration and the massive suicide of the lemmings was recorded some hundreds of kilometers south of the arctic circle. The lemmings did not throw themselves from the rocks but were pushed. Biologists now seem to accept that lemmings do not commit suicide en masse. According to them there aren't even such rocks in the polar area for the lemmings to fall off...

Similarly during analysis of the Canadian documentary “The Cruel Camera” on animal abuse in wildlife programs it became apparent that a lot of footage was staged, mostly in the name of ‘helping nature a little bit’ (though of course there were also financial considerations). When these reactions were presented to an American nature filmer, he refused to comment. Or, to put in another way: he was absolutely unaddressable on whether the truth was told or not. We had to view his program as the truth and we are not allowed to make critical remarks about it. Many nature films deliberately speak untruths. They construct “realities” and pass them off as “genuine”. And the audience can hardly do anything other than accept what they are shown as true.

One more example: An audiovisual program can contain the proposition: “The condition of women in the Third World should improve”. That seems fine and one can have very little opposition to that. However, it makes a great difference whether this message comes from a manufacturer of milk powder or a Food Union. And it is exactly this information which is lacking in many audiovisual programs.

Who are the makers? What is the relation of the makers to the content? Whose interest is represented? If these are not apparent in the program then the performative part of the

communicative act is hidden. Sometimes this omission will be deliberate (as it is with covert sponsorship and product placement). Sometimes it is the result of laziness.

But whenever the performative part is lacking, the program is no longer an example of communicative action (aimed at constructing criticisable validity claims to promote understanding), but one of strategic action (aimed at producing a particular response by the viewers, i.e. accepting the program makers viewpoints).

So it takes effort to make criticisable programs. It is easy to stay on the background and to promote yourself as 'neutral', 'balanced', 'not being there', or 'just a vehicle for other people's opinions'. Maybe it is the biggest difference between conventional television and the approach suggested in the "Media Action Projects" book. In some ways it takes more effort to make criticisable programs, to aim for a common understanding, or to say reality is complex and not easy to understand, or to say things differ.

A good example of someone who makes television programs and who is criticisable is the German programme maker Bernward Wember.

He is quite explicit about his validity claims in his program "Poisoned or on the Dole" (Original German title: "Vergiftet oder Arbeitslos"). He is open about his interest: we are going to look at the problems brought about by agricultural expansionism. He informs us that the two parties involved are the chemical industry and the green movement and also indicates that the programme is made from the viewpoint of the green movement. This programme (first televised in 1984) brought Wember into sharp conflict with the German chemical industry and parts of the film were censored as well as parts of the accompanying book. It is astonishing to look at a page where parts of the text are blackened by a censor in Germany in the early nineties.

After a series of prosecutions and lawsuits he asked the chemical industry why they were so hard on him. After all, the green movement makes films about the wickedness of the chemical industry, the television companies make programmes about pollution, so why bother? The answer was that they could not tolerate the form in which he had made the programme. In fact they were saying that the programme was not just clear in its content (the propositional part), but also in how the content should be seen (as a contribution to a discussion) and even contained the question to talk about when it had been broadcast

(the performative part). The programme had a great response by the audience who said that it was the first time they really understood the complicated problem.

If we are to apply Habermas's theory to the making and distribution of our own programmes we need to be clear about the ways in which programme-makers can claim truth, normative legitimacy and authenticity through their work. We also need to know how audiences can discuss and challenge these validity claims if they wish to do so.

These are important questions, which should be raised when using video for communication. We should ensure that we are starting from a situation in which the participants involved are directed at the reaching of an understanding (that this will be Communicative Action, not Strategic Action). We shall consider them first in respect of the programme makers then in respect of the audience.

PROGRAMME MAKERS

TRUTH

As far as the senders are concerned (with their documentary, factual programs with a clear claim on truth) we can say that they claim the truth if they come up with valid utterances based on research of a formulated question. At its most basic they will undertake not to tell a half-truth as the truth. (In the light of our observations about the institutionalised deceitfulness of the medium this may be difficult). In addition to this it is important that they make their validity claims on the basis of this research. As we said when describing the "Media Action Projects Model", good research requires a research question which covers the problem, the parties involved and a possible solutions. The process of discussing and exploring this presupposition with all the involved parties is designed to uncover what is seen as the truth by those parties, and also where there are differences of opinion on facts.

NORMATIVE LEGITIMACY

When the group make and distribute their programme they are effectively claiming that they have the normative right to transfer these messages, under these circumstances to the audience, and to use video (or another audiovisual medium) for doing so. The makers of video programmes must realise that, with their programmes, they have the ability to

exercise influence on the opinion forming processes with the recipients. By making a programme they say, in fact, that they have something important to say. In “Poisoned or on the Dole” Wember claims the normative right to make a programme on his terms and from the point of view of the environment movement. This claim is all the more obvious because most television programmes prioritise the industry’s viewpoint.

AUTHENTICITY

The group’s claim on authenticity can be found in their implied assertion that they mean what they say with their message, believe in it and are emotionally attached to the content. This sounds simple but it is often the case that makers do not mean what they say and wrap up their message in a way whereby form dominates content and a ‘beautiful’ program appears. The audience may never be given the chance to engage with the programme’s concerns. And it is very common for a group to make a programme and then show no interest in when and to whom it is shown. I have already stated the importance of makers being there when their product is shown. It can be a real, physical presence or through a telephone or studio link. Eventually makers might not be able to be with their programme at every screening but they can still make plans for their work to be shown in a way that will include discussions and exchange of opinions.

AUDIENCE

TRUTH

As far as the audience (the receivers) are concerned we can state that the programme’s claim for truth must allude to a clear-cut proposition. It makes the group and the program criticisable. On top of that the programme offers insight into the truths of the group. By considering a clear cut proposition in the product the audience can develop its own position towards the content. In this way environmentalists and industrialists can take their respective positions on the facts discussed in Wember’s ‘Poisoned or on the Dole’.

NORMATIVE LEGITIMACY

The receivers can test the claim for normative legitimacy to the data if the norms and the relations of the makers to the content are clear and criticisable. Both the group and their product are available for criticism on a normative level. An example may further clarify the validity claims: Let us imagine that a group of milk-powder manufacturers, in an

audiovisual program, proclaims the message that the position of woman in the Third World should improve. Let's say they made a convincing program. As a recipient I am left with the question where this group finds the normative right to address me with this message, because, in my political social opinion this group has contributed in practice to the exploitation of woman in the Third World. The claim to normative legitimacy is an important point when any group makes programmes about other people. It is to question the rights of white middle class males to make and transmit messages on ethnic minorities, women, liberation movements, workers, etc.

AUTHENTICITY

When considering the programme the audience must be able to identify the programme-makers' claim to authenticity, and compare it with their own beliefs and sincerity towards the subject. In a programme which works as communicative, rather than strategic action, the material will encourage the audience's own need to get into dialogue with the makers or the people or situations shown. They may recognise who the makers are, not only by doing some analytical puzzle, but because they are visible. Real interaction is visible and audible between the people in front of the technique and behind the machinery. The audience really get the feeling of being one third of the triangle with the makers and the participants. People wrote to Wember that now, for the first time they understand relations between the environment and carbon-dioxide. Put in a scheme this whole network of validity claims looks as follows:

	SENDER	RECEIVER
TRUTH	Coming to valid claims of the truth on the basis of research of a formulated hypotheses	The product has a clear supposition by which group and product are criticisable. The program also gives insight in the values of the group
NORMATIVE LEGITIMACY	The right to give this message to the recipient under these circumstances	Norms an the relation of the makers to the subject become clear and criticisable. Group and product are, on a normative level available for critic.

AUTHENTICITY	The claim that you really mean your message and your intentions	Belief in the intentions and aims, but also in the emotions of the makers and participants. The program is part of a dialogue in which you too are involved
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So far we have not touched on the concrete form of a product. The table concerns the structure of the communicative process following the claims of a group and a product on truth, normative legitimacy and truthfulness/ authenticity. Between the makers of products and the target group stands the form of the message and the channel through which it will pass. The closer the makers are in social and cultural terms to the target groups, the easier it will be for them to choose the most appropriate form for their product. When a group is culturally separate from the target group, it will have to study the recipient conditions and subcultural backgrounds of the target audience. Practically this means that the group studies codes and conventions of the target group, not to improve their ability to manipulate them, but out of respect for their individuality. By considering this scheme, derived from Habermas' theory on communicative action, the programme makers can do practical self-research on the validity claims of their program. The audience will also be offered efficient ways of agreeing or disagreeing with the validity claims or criticising the programme and will see whether they are taken seriously or are just used as 'viewing figures' to raise the broadcasters income on commercials.

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