

# COMMUNICATION AS GESTURE

## DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIETY: POLITICS, ECONOMY AND CULTURE IN NETWORK COMMUNICATION

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# COMMUNICATION AS GESTURE

Media(tion), Meaning, &  
Movement

BY

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# Prologue

There once was a linguist most eerie,  
whose papers made everyone weary;  
but when we called them twaddle  
he roared, “It’s a MODEL!  
I never once called it a theory!”

Suzette Haden Elgin (1987, *The Judas Rose*)

This book is part historical exercise and part theoretical synthesis, both of which involve revisioning what communication is by reconsidering what we have for centuries thought it to be. The early twenty-first century seems to me to be a particularly good time for such a reconsideration because the ways in which most of us now interact with one another are in some ways — technological ways — so vastly experientially different than anything else in human history. At the same time, human beings — our sensory apparatus, the bodies-and-brains that make sense of our worlds and each other — have not changed in any dramatic way since well before the shift from hunter-gatherer to agricultural communities.

While human beings have always (already) been technological beings (whether using spears or spades or smartphone apps, cowries or coins or credits), our fascination with technological novelty has unfortunately led much of the investigation of communication and language into a labyrinth of dead ends. Some of those ends are ‘dead’ in sense of being almost entirely inhuman apotheoses of, for example, ‘algorithmic cultures’. Far too often, either the human and the technological are functionally divorced from one another and taken to be completely separate phenomena, or (sometimes even and) technological evolution is assumed to be directly indicative of or isomorphic with human evolution, usually some kind of disembodied cognitive evolution of technologized minds. Both of these misconceptions are the logical result of basic theoretical assumptions about what communication is, how it works, and what it does — assumptions that conjunctively shape our

conceptions of what human being is because being human happens in communication.

Over the past few decades, a loose collection of broad themes has variously coalesced in Western theoretical circles involving the deep relationality of all things, broadly considered in terms of 'posthumanism', for example. This underlying relational onto-epistemology entails a spatialized account of interaction (as in, for example, the use of 'ecology', or more reductively 'network', as a general structural metaphor), which further entails the imbrication of interaction, communication, and mediation as basic theoretical concepts across a wide range of interests and disciplinary perspectives. 'Communication', broadly conceived, has thus moved to the heart of contemporary philosophical and theoretical trends across a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, while, simultaneously, the continuing dynamic evolution of communication technology has set in high relief the myriad complex interactions that constitute mundane human life and beyond.

However, the diverse fields of investigation comprising communication studies, importantly including new and digital media studies, have arguably contributed little to the shaping of these theoretical currents (apart, perhaps, from the reductive metaphor of 'the network'). The reason for this is that the basic assumptions of communication studies, rooted in classical rhetoric, linguistics, semiotics, classical information theory, and cybernetics, are bound to linear, reductive, positivistic philosophical assumptions that are broadly incompatible with any kind of relational onto-epistemology.

Ironically, these assumptions, of which the conventional 'sender-message-receiver model' is emblematic, are almost universally acknowledged to be inadequate. Nevertheless, that acknowledged inadequacy has done nothing to uproot or weed out the linear positivistic assumptions that ground communication studies. We all accept that 'everything is connected', but we approach connection itself in terms of the analytical *separation* of both discrete entities comprising 'information' and linguistic categories that uncritically conceive 'text' (in varying conflated senses of the term) as 'data'.

This book makes three broad, imbricated moves to address these problems. First it reconsiders the roots of the study of communication in rhetoric, linguistics, semiotics, information theory, and cybernetics, to uncover the underlying theoretical and methodological limitations embedded in traditional assumptions about communication. Second, it demonstrates that a more relational understanding of communication

processes can be recovered and gathered from the inherent relations among these roots. Third, it reintegrates these theoretical and philosophical roots with more recent work in spatial cognition, interactional sociology, and ecological and relational psychology to provide a matrix for a meta-theoretical account of communication based on a theoretical concept of ‘gesture’ that emanates from a fundamentally relational onto-epistemology.

The purpose of this book, then, is primarily to articulate the problem and prepare the ground for further conversation. The final section of the book provides a coalescence and integration of the major themes, and (perhaps despite my title) just the barest hint of what a post-transmission or post-exchange communication theory could be. I very much look forward to those conversations and, in the meantime, I hope that this book can serve to introduce future interlocutors to a variety of disciplinary histories and theoretical perspectives that share roots but have only rarely interacted directly.

This book is a focused extension of my dissertation, completed at the University of Illinois at Chicago. For that reason, all of those who supported and contributed to that exercise are similarly culpable for this one. However, I must acknowledge the continued support of Athina Karatzogianni, the Editor of this series, without whom this book and much of the broader project to which it belongs would certainly not have been possible. Sincere gratitude to Roy Christopher and Andrew Rojecki for both valuable feedback and moral support. I also want to thank Cindy Sherman Bishop for her interest, her gracious and insistent sharing of vast social capital, and just for listening. Finally, but most importantly, thanks to Betty Chun for continued faith and support (and prodding).

Michael Schandorf  
Seattle, Washington  
December 2018

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# Introduction

In reality, there is nothing but interaction. With a simple shift in scale, coherent objects that appear to be irrefutably solid are found to comprise dynamic and fluid interactions amongst components. The unyielding metal becomes a sea of flowing electrons when examined more closely. Continents collide, seabeds become summits, and mountains melt away when we set our clocks to tick geologically. So too are ideological edifices but seas of words, though all too often backed by bullets and blades, poisoned door knobs, and “weapons of math destruction”. The most treasured and firmly held ideas, upon closer examination, are found to be — as they have always been — nexus of dynamic interaction.

In the swirling unpredictability of our world, the mere perception of stability can be comforting, even if the imposition and enforcement of such stability inevitably creates more chaos. The comfort of stability often feels like the only thing worth fighting for, but there is always entropy in the end. The universe is an ongoing explosion that is in slow motion only from our particular vantage point and scale. Nothing in life stands still.

Contrary to common comportment, life is not a struggle against entropy but the complex organization of inherently entropic processes. Life creates or harnesses dynamic flows of order within the chaos. But chaos and order are themselves defined by our perceptions of relation and interaction. Chaos is unpredictable interaction; order is interaction as we expect it, or at least an identifiable pattern of probability. Chaos, order, and the life that binds them are all forms — or better, *categories* of interaction.

Early twentieth-century psychologist Lev Vygotsky insisted that thinking itself was a process of making relations: “Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relation between things” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 218). We understand our worlds as sets of relations, as the interactions among ourselves and objects and phenomena, each of which comprises further complexes of relations and complex interactions. The complexity of these relations makes life possible.

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Not long after Vygotsky, Claude Shannon (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), a mathematician and engineer at Bell Telephone Research Labs, conceived the chaos and complexity of twenty-first century life by formulating communication as *negative entropy* – as a coherent signal figured against a background of dense chaos. The ability to cut a channel through the static to move a message through space at the speed of an electron upset expectations about the relation of space to time. Complex interaction at a distance no longer depends upon the time it takes to move pages through the post. Now we post to the world with the touch of a screen, and everyone I know is in my pocket – whether I like it or not.

Early evangelists of our technologies of instant connection insisted that more interaction, supposedly freed from the constraints of time and space, would bind us all together by freeing us from our bondage to bodies and the material world and, in the process, would generate evermore rewarding dynamic stability. And for a moment, for those who shared such sentiments and had the means to participate, perhaps it did. But there is always entropy. Now many of us find in all this connection only a deeper chaos – or a field of battle extended in space and compressed in time to the always-now.

Did we get it all wrong? The answer depends entirely on what you think the “it” in that question points to. One of the underlying arguments of this book is that, in trying to investigate and understand communication – particularly digitally mediated communication – we have taken far too much for granted. In particular, we have put far too much blind faith in discretization and our ability to unambiguously define our objects of study. No, this will not become an argument against the digital. No, Google and Facebook are not making us dumber, and social media is not destroying social interaction. Nor am I going to make an argument against math, even if I challenge the dominance of the discrete. The key idea is that if our object of study is relation and interaction – and if interaction is everything – then maybe beginning that investigation by pulling everything apart into discrete pieces, thereby dissolving the relations, and dissecting and destroying the interactions we’re interested in, may not get us where we really want and need to go.

In a cliché, communication, as the process of relation and interaction, is more than the sum of its parts. When we remember that what we see is heavily dependent not only on our perspective but on the scale of our seeing, we may remember that every point is a space, that every node is a network all its own. Abstraction is a wonderful,

powerful (and inescapable) tool for reducing complexity, but such reduction also limits our conceptions of the world to what has been defined *a priori* by our privileged frame of reference. Maybe what we need to give more attention to is not the abstractions of data points or the abstractions of lines connecting the abstractions of nodes in the network, but the imbricated abstract spaces that define, shape, and construe those points and lines, as well as their interconnections, interactions, and intra-actions. The question is, can we come to see the spaces while leaving the points and lines in flux? Can we investigate interaction without chopping it into inactive pieces? Can we come to know the forest without pulling out all of the trees (and, at best, ignoring everything else that makes up a forest)?

This book is an attempt to answer, or at least approach, that question. It is a book about the theory and philosophy of communication. It is about how we have come to think about communication in the ways that we do, and about how less confining and more fecund alternatives to those views have been present from the very beginning.

“Alright, fine”, you say. “But why ‘gesture’? Even as a subtitle, *Media(tion), Meaning, & Movement* doesn’t immediately tell me anything about interaction, or relation, or about what I typically think of as communication processes, or about digital media for that matter. It sounds like it could just as easily be a book about *dance*.” In a way it is.

In the middle of the previous century – just about the time Shannon proposed his mathematical theory of information transmission – communication scholar and theorist Kenneth Burke (1941) wrote that “the symbolic act is the dancing of an attitude” (p. 9). Interaction is *action*. Meaning is made in movement – movement of bodies, objects, and ideas – movements like ‘transmission’ and ‘exchange’. But the transmission and exchange of information among bounded entities does not finally define the limits of interaction among the world’s fluid and dynamic components. However, the chain of *abstractions* defining communication as the transmission and exchange of signs or symbols as information *does* enforce fairly severe limits on how we can conceive of interaction in the world.

The abstraction of ‘gesture’ is a different way to understand the movements of meaning. We typically think of a gesture as something trivial, something small, something minor – as the weak initiation of an act not quite brought to completion. A gesture of sympathy. A nod of recognition. A wave, a wink, a nudge, a shrug, a raised eyebrow

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indicate an acknowledgment, express a reaction, point to a place, but make no promises and (usually) commit no indictable offense. A gesture indicates a direction but makes few commitments to definition. Gleaning meaning from a gesture requires immersion in the interactional situation, requires imbrication in the flows of meaning already in process. And for this reason, gesture is far more complex than we might think, especially if our idea of communication is limited to the exchange of discrete, objectively definable signs.

A gesture, then, is more than a sign of interaction, more than a signal, more than a data point – a gesture is not a word (though a word can make a gesture). A gesture is a movement from me to you generating a dynamic space of relations that make our sharing of meaning possible – while mocking our compulsion towards the discrete and definable. At minimum, a gesture requires a pointer, a person doing the pointing, another person for whom the pointing is done, and some object (thing, idea, feeling, or phenomenon) being thereby intentionally invested with relevance for both. The act of pointing itself establishes a meaningful relation among self and other in a shared world.

In a world where interaction is everything, the gesture is an act of world-making.

This is not a new idea. (It's actually ancient.) Neuroscientist Raymond Tallis (2010), in his wonderful *Michelangelo's Finger*, makes a similar argument using language from which I have borrowed above. More recently, Chad Engelland (2014), using the more philosophically specific term *ostension*, has provided a masterful exposition of how thinkers from Aristotle and St Augustine to Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein have argued that gesture provides the necessary ground for any kind of communication. "All communication is movement," argues semiotician Gunther Kress (2010) – "Movement and meaning are intertwined" (p. 116). This is because gesture enacts the fundamental acknowledgment of the other as a fellow maker of meaning in a shared world. And meanings, psychologist John Shotter (1975) argues, "are a part of our ways of going on, for they 'point to', given what we are doing now, what we could go on to try to do in the future – if we see our actions as having any meaning at all" (p. 38). And thus human action – and interaction, and intra-action – "by its very nature of always 'pointing to', or of 'containing' or 'specifying' something beyond or other than itself, posits a context of possibilities within which it also occurs; in other words, it posits a world" (Shotter, 1984, p. 130). "Simply to glance at someone is to posit a world in which

recognition of like by like is possible, in which ‘recognition’ is a possible activity” (p. 144).

Meaning is generated in and from relations, and our minds instinctively, reflexively understand any set of relations in our worlds, any situation, as a ‘space’. For that reason, the sets of relations that we conventionally understand as ‘spaces’ are imbued with and shape meaning in ways that are often taken for granted. Anthropologist Drid Williams (1995) insists that “spatial orientation is the conceptual groundwork on which intelligent and intersubjective relations with other people(s) are based” (pp. 51–52). “The spaces in which human acts occur” she argues, “are not simply physical spaces. They are simultaneously physical, moral, and ethical spaces.” Thus discourse, the act of making and sharing meaning, “by its very nature is socially embodied” argues anthropologist Bonnie Urciouli (1995); “Defining *here* and *now* at any given moment is a social action, always dependent on the *I-you* relation. At every moment, the person is a cultural construction” (p. 190) of a relational space, and “the physical space is part of the social space [...] Time and space are conceptual, moral, and ethical before they are physical” (p. 193). For similar reasons, linguistic anthropologist William Hanks (1990) makes the case that “Egocentricity is a special case of sociocentricity” (p. 515): “Speakers do not participate in communication as neatly bounded human subjects but rather as parts of interactive frameworks, temporary occupants of relationally defined roles” (p. 85).

In light of these and many other similar arguments, communication and interaction are better understood fundamentally not in terms of language – as the exchange of meaning in words – but as the fundamental ground from which language is made possible. As political scientist David McNally (2001) argues, “Consciousness and language [...] are modes of my embodied being-with-others” (p. 124). “Language”, sociologist C. Wright Mills (1940) insisted, “is primarily for the coordination of diverse social activity” (p. 904). Language “is a form of relatedness [...] meaning is born of interdependence”, argues psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991, p. 157).

The language the child acquires is not a code for translating something that happens in one person’s skull to what happens in another person’s skull. Language, born by ostension, continues to move in the dimension of manifestation: language achieves joint presence even regarding absent things. Our bodies are not outside us.

Our language is not extrinsic to us. We humans are the ostensive animal. (Engelland, 2014, p. 217)

Gesture, then, is “the original form of the disclosive power proper to speech” (Engelland, 2014, p. 207). Gesture is the meaningful movement that generates relation and defines the space of potential interaction. Social scientist Gregory Bateson (1972) argued long ago that “we have to start all over again from the beginning and assume that language is first and foremost a system of gestures” (p. 13). For, “in a fundamental sense”, writes Adam Kendon (2004) (who, quite literally, wrote the book on gesture), “it is only through some non-linguistic action on non-linguistic aspect of the situation, that the tie between an utterance and its spatial or temporal circumstance can ultimately be established” (p. 222).

Sir Richard Paget (1930) insisted in the early twentieth century that “It will be no disgrace to human speech if, after all it should turn out to be (as I believe it is) a branch of human gesture” (pp. 195–196). Paget echoes Chicago School sociologist Robert Park (1927) who had argued – long before anyone dreamed of today’s ambient digital connections – that

In human society every act of every individual tends to become a gesture, since what one does is always an indication of what one intends to do. The consequence is that the individual in society lives a more or less public existence, in which all his acts are anticipated, checked, inhibited, or modified by the gestures and the intentions of his fellows. It is in this social conflict, in which every individual lives more or less in the mind of every other individual, that human nature and the individual may acquire their most characteristic and human traits. (Park, 1927, p. 738)

We are, indeed, the ostensive animal.

Even *written* language is fundamentally grounded in embodied meaning and the gestural generation of spaces of relations. “We always write from a place,” argues rhetoric and writing scholar Jenny Rice (2012), “and our writing creates spaces” (p. 12). My weaving of the words of other thinkers, words scattered across disciplines and decades, my gestures to other scholars who have made similar or supporting arguments, ‘lays the groundwork’ and generates in this introduction a space of relations in which my arguments, my meanings will, I hope,

become sensible to you as you move through the rest of the book. This is necessary to the extent that if you and I, dear reader, are not in the same space — not ‘on the same page’ — if we are not sharing an understanding of the defining ‘common ground’ of relations, we are likely to misunderstand one another: “one has, in some sense, to be within the same situation as the giver of the account if one is to appreciate its nature” (Shotter, 1985, p. 451).

The page, as Aristotle understood, is a space, a place, a *topos* in his Greek, a *locus* in the Latin that came later: a place from which arguments are made. As rhetoric scholar Bruce McComisky (2015) writes, “A rhetorical performance, then, is the purposeful construction of socialized linkages that form orientations through the strategic use of signification” (p. 102, fn 7). The writing of a letter (or a text message) may be motivated by physical separation, but the goal of that letter, at least in part, is to reinforce the psychological and emotional space that we share. I write to let you know that you are ‘in my thoughts’. Between the writing and the reading, the words enact the relation, perform the place that we inhabit together, in and as relation to one another.

A favorite trick question in undergraduate communication courses used to be ‘Where are you when you’re on the phone?’ — a thorny philosophical problem for early scholars of electronically mediated communication. Where the printed page provided a physical place in which to mark the space of relations generated by mediated communication, the telephone conversation was, in a certain sense, a temporal sense, immediate. The telephone conversation radically resected the here from the now in a way that written and printed communication did not — unless you count the ghostly taps of the telegraph. Electronically and digitally mediated forms of communication provide a sometimes jarring and startling revelation of the many kinds of spaces we simultaneously inhabit. Facebook is a place. A text message conversation builds a shared space. But we have continued to try to understand these space-making phenomena primarily as or in terms of technological objects.

Trying to understand mediated communication by focusing our attention on the screens of our digital devices, for example, is likely to be about as rewarding as trying to understand reading by studying paper-making. Can’t see the forest for the (dead) trees.

This book, then, attempts to build a new space by integrating a variety of disciplinary perspectives on communication in order to address or reconfigure a broad set of methodological issues in the study

of communication. The stakes are readily apparent in recent complaints about the negative social and psychological effects of our reliance on digital technologies. The idea is that by relying so heavily on our digitally connected tools and toys and the easy access to information that they provide, the human interaction necessary for a good life is being replaced by interaction with devices. Our reliance on these technologies is said to result, on the one hand, in an atrophying of vital social skills, and on the other related hand, in a diminishing of critical psychological and perceptual capacities for knowing and understanding the worlds we inhabit.

The specifics of these complaints may at times be true, but they rest upon a faulty underlying assumption that has shaped much of the research on digital technology, an assumption which continues to implicitly shape popular discussion: that the digital is *different*, that digitally mediated communication is inherently and categorically different from non-digital or un-mediated, face-to-face, human interaction. While it is broadly understood to extend the range of human access to the world through information, digitally mediated interaction is typically taken to be a reduced or even debased caricature of face-to-face, embodied interaction. The implication is that digital technologies are wonderful and powerful, but also debased and harmful. Like a drug, the right dose may cure, but too much is poison.

The logic of this argument seems to be that digitally mediated communication is powerful because it reduces interaction to precise points of widely transmittable and exchangeable bits of information, but it is dangerous precisely because of this reduction of the fullness of the human capacity for making and sharing meaning. As we will see, the idea that digitally mediated interaction is a reduction of human capacities is a relic of the earliest studies of computer-mediated communication, which was of necessity limited to short text messages.

Those first early studies of digitally mediated interaction were also shaped within the broader study of 'new' media. An emphasis, or even fetishization of novelty, is a defining characteristic of the study of communication technologies (hence, the 'new media studies' from which 'digital media studies' emerged), but as we will see, an emphasis on the 'new' is deeply embedded in the study of – and even the definition of – information itself. The emphasis on the 'newness' of technology, combined with the inherent understanding of mediated communication's narrowed and reduced capacity, almost inevitably leads to an understanding of digitally mediated interaction as something