

# Reclaiming the art of communication

December 2 2016, by Olaf Werder

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So much to say, but who's paying attention? Credit: Flickr/jordan, CC BY-NC-ND

In a world of mass communication and social media, people seem prepared to share their opinion on almost any subject.

When it comes to remembering a conversation you were involved in, in most cases the deciding factor is the contribution you made to that conversation, according to British journalist [Catherine Blyth](#) in her 2008 advice book [The Art of Conversation](#).

But today when people talk, online and offline, any real dialogue seems to have given way to parallel monologues, paired with an inability to actively listen.

## Healthy advice

A brief trip into my own discipline of health [communication](#) illustrates the dilemma. The core argument of what makes health promotion work is that the promoter must first find the barriers as to why people don't live healthier. The promoter then converts those into convincing campaigns.

Yet, health promoters still have difficulties explaining why seemingly reasonable people still deliberately disregard or dismiss their messages. In Australia alone, the federal Department of Health says smoking still kills an [estimated 15,000 people](#) a year.

So, how do we explain that people wilfully choose to harm their future health by ignoring sound health marketing? Researchers call this phenomenon health resistance. It is basically a lack of motivation to comply with someone else's ideas of good and bad.

And since every form of communication starts with someone's own worldview, which has to pass through the filter of a possibly very different worldview of others, these rebellious reactions are not surprising.

In politics and social issues (debates of marriage equality, climate change, race and religion, etc), we witness an increasingly dire split and hardening of positions. But the attempt to focus on perfecting one's own arguments has equally led to an impasse in advancing public health.

## Communication skills

The study of communication has its origins in rhetoric and public speaking skills of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Rhetoric teaches the art of using persuasive tools. However the idea of resolving disagreement through measured agreeable discussion, known as the dialectic method, played an equal role to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

With this in mind, it is interesting to see how our outlooks of communication have changed in modern times. Back in 1922, the American writer and reporter [Walter Lippmann](#) still called communication:

*"[...] a central and constitutive place in the study of social relations."*

This opinion was echoed by his contemporary, philosopher [John Dewey](#), who argued that:

*"[...] communication can by itself create a community."*

This early definition was close to the spirit of the dialectic method. It was also in line with the root of the word "communication", which comes from the Latin *communicare* (to share or to make common) and *communis* (belonging to all). Both terms are also related to the word "community".

## The rise of mass media

The rise of electronic communication technologies and mass media after World War II shifted the focus onto a more scientific interest of how

best to disseminate information. This was famously symbolised by the [communication loop model](#) of Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver.

A growing interest in the information processing capacity of communication ultimately led to a detachment from the art of debate.

Persuasion and media effects concepts moved centre stage. Those areas were especially useful for purposeful or strategic communication that were needed in political campaigning, marketing and public relations. Those fields, not coincidentally, grew in importance at the same time.

US communication scholar [William Eadie](#) noted that by the 1980s communication in the United States had been separated from the study of speech and rhetoric. It was more associated primarily with learning journalism and media production, while the latter became subcategories of English.

The dawn of the information age intensified the focus on creating messages further by providing people with unfiltered, instant access to media and removing communicators from real audiences.

Whereas the idea of the internet as a democratic source of information and active engagement was noble, the web algorithms that filtered what someone was exposed to along their interests created an echo chamber of one's own held opinions. It effectively reduced communicative competency to engage in human dialogue.

If we look at the current public and political dialogue in many countries, it seems bleak. The fallout from the US presidential campaign and the UK's Brexit vote are just two examples.

But we know from psychology that humans have a natural drive toward

belonging and contribution (being heard) and finding expressions of their creativity (being inspired). This explains social movements, the fan culture in sports and participatory management.

## Getting the message through

One way to arrive at practising a slower and more compassionate communication style is to borrow ideas from the [Slow Movement](#). We can step away from instant responses and replace the idea of [conversations as a competition](#), with a win-win mentality.

The field of [health communication](#) attempts this in the form of community-involved and -led health campaigns, creating ownership, mutual voice and togetherness in the process.

On an individual level, we need to balance impersonal with personal communication, seek out and engage with opposing opinions on purpose, and try understanding the background for someone's position by actively listening.

This goes beyond the freedom of speech idea. It forms an attempt to find common ground when talking to each other, which is not coincidentally also a definition of the term "community".

Besides the obvious effects in building connections, it has direct health implications, working against isolation, antagonism and stress.

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