

From Social Communication to Information Architecture: The experience is the message

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Introduction

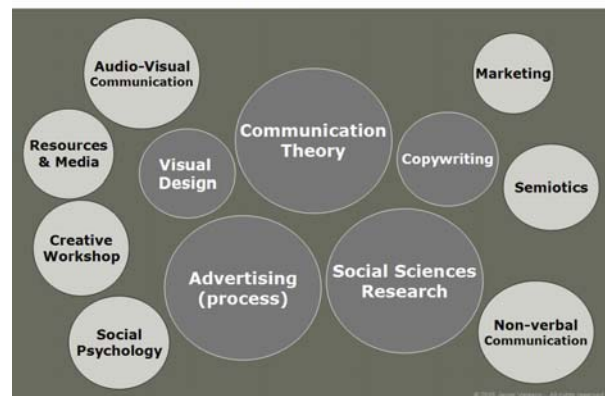
The point of this presentation is to look at Social Communication as a source of theories and methods that can be usefully applied to Information Architecture. In other words, this is the story of how I went from Communication student to IA practitioner.

I've always been interested in people; I think we make one of the most interesting subjects of study out there. In particular I like to study how we communicate with each other. During my high school days, I used to spend my commuting hours in the bus looking at my fellow passengers and trying to figure out how much I could learn from them by looking at their clothes, the writings on their backpacks, their vocabulary, gestures, haircut etc. When I had to choose a career to follow, I wanted something to address this interest and my strong inclination towards the visual world: I went to the Communication School.

In general terms we can describe Social Communication as *the design of communication campaigns to send a message through media*. We usually see this in advertising, and political propaganda, but also in education, like for example, in campaigns to quit smoking or drunk-driving.

If we take a look at the curriculum for social communication as taught in my school, we will see that the core courses are Communication Theory, Social sciences research and Advertising. The strongest auxiliary courses were Visual design and Copywriting, two areas that link directly to IA. Other auxiliary courses at my school were, Creative Workshop, Semiotics, Social

Social Communication Curriculum



Psychology, and Non-verbal Communication. Some of you will immediately start noticing how this skill set can be useful for an Information Architect.

During my communication student years, the web was becoming more popular and reaching our homes, I looked at it as the new medium, full of opportunities, for creating new ways of communicating people. I was fascinated by the idea of what would happen if we could communicate with people from all around the world through this net. I did my thesis on this subject. Never could I imagine that I'd end up in a conference that was organized through email.

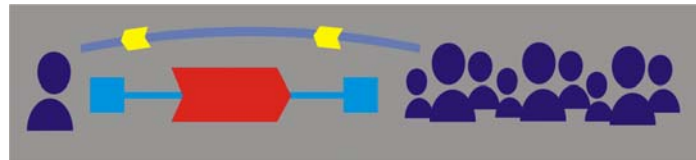
I then learned how to build websites – thanks to meeting the right people at the right time - and later became an IA, again, with the help of a wonderful community of practitioners via the Internet.

During my work I've found many similarities between Communication and IA. I've found my education in communication to be very useful for an IA. But in order to keep things short and organized, this time we'll focus on Communication Theory and the Processes that these two fields follow, which I believe are very similar.

Communication Theory

Information Theory

We start by looking at Information Theory, the most known model of Communication.



The research around this model

moved in time, focusing on the message, the channel, the effect, the audience, and feedback. How does this relate to IA?

It can be said that we build complex, multi-dimensional messages, so rich in information they become spaces, BJ Fogg opened this conference by pointing out how these technologies are persuasive, so we better acknowledge this and take responsibility for it. Feedback? Just think about the kind of feedback we build into websites!

Interactional View

Some years later, the Palo Alto Group, led by Paul Watzlawick, developed a different approach to Communication Theory, more focused on a human level and face to face interaction. They developed five axioms, in this presentation we'll focus on two of these.

One cannot not communicate (1)

This means that anything we do sends out a message: the way in which we walk, talk, dress, our haircut, how we shave (or don't).

How does this affect IA?

This makes us realize that every decision in our design will send out a message, and this has implications in classification; the way in which we classify things says something about who we are and what we believe. Imagine this scenario, which actually happened to me

some years ago: You're developing a taxonomy for a large newspaper and the war in Iraq is just starting, you anticipate that this issue will require its own category, where do you put it under?

- Society > International Conflicts > Terrorism > War on Terror
- Economics > Fuel > Oil

We don't need to say much further to explain how whatever option we choose will send out a strong message. PeterMe was pointing out something similar in his presentation last year at this same conference; he explained how the Dewey Decimal System, which was supposed to be a neutral universal classification system, had eight out of ten categories under languages to represent European languages, and something similar happened for religion. Our taxonomies reflect how we see the world.

The first axiom of the Interactional view also has implications in interaction design; we can't claim "we're here to help you" and have our website do the opposite. How many times have we seen search engines that lead to a dead end when there are null results?... and offer as only option "Try again". This sends out *contradictory messages*: on one level we claim to help the user, but in practice, we don't. Since we also know that *actions speak louder than words* we can realize that the user will believe we are lying with our textual message: *the experience is the message*, and this message will lead to frustration.



Communication = Content + Relationship (3)

Their third axiom states that communication happens on two simultaneous levels: content and relationship (3).

This means that when we talk, we interchange messages but we also establish relationships, and that the meaning of our message is transformed by the nature of our

relationship. It is for this reason that we can play jokes on friends that would offend strangers. Again, I'll take a look at PeterMe who is arriving at similar notions (and using the same keywords!), when he says in his new year's resolutions that:

“... Sound **content** helps both parties to get to know one another better, creating a mutually beneficial **connection**.” And that from now on, he intends to look at “...user experience design of websites not as a matter of managing **content**, but as a matter of nurturing and maturing **relationships**.”

I think he's getting somewhere here!



Behavior Coordination

The third theory that I'll share with you in this presentation was developed in my own country, Chile, by a team of Neurobiologists:



Humberto Maturana and the late Francisco Varela. They defined communication as behavior coordination, which means that communication is not about sending messages, but that communication happens when our interaction leads us to work on a common goal or task. The typical example that Maturana would give during class is how we can wave to a cab driver and he'll make a U-turn and stop right in front of us.

In terms of Web Design and Information Architecture, an important part of what we work on are customer service websites. These are projects in which the company (an organized group of people) tries to solve the problems of its customers by providing critical information, giving them tools to solve their needs, or allowing them to interact with company members in order to address those requirements. Company and customer work on a common goal, through the interaction that

is mediated by the website. Also, when we build online communities or social software, we are shaping a space for people to interact with each other towards a common goal or task.

For the third time and last, we look at PeterMe who is reaching similar conclusions

“...**Content** is interesting only in the way it allows readers to **successfully perform some task**, while creators achieve an **organizational goal**.”

Processes

Besides theory, I’ve also seen many similarities between the processes that these two fields generally follow. In the broadest sense, both processes can be seen as having stages for *research*, *strategy*, *design* and *testing*, we’ll now see how these compare.

Test
Design
Strategy
Research

Research

Both disciplines start by focusing on the *context*, getting critical information from the ever important *stakeholders*, figuring out who your *audience* is (we call them users).

Research	Social Communication	Information Architecture
	Analysis	Analysis ?
	Audience	Users
	Stakeholders	Stakeholders
	Context	Context

But then we see the first difference: Communication has an important stage for analysis, and has developed several tools for this. Why aren’t we doing something similar in IA?

Here are some tools from communication that could be useful to IA:

- The positioning map helps plan where we want to be located in a two dimension chart of concepts, this location reflects how we are seen by the public in comparison with the rest of the market (imagine cost vs. speed in cars). My friend Dennis Schleicher uses this all the time, and with great results.
- A second example of analysis tools is the SWOT analysis, where you realize your own *strengths* and *weaknesses*, and discover the *opportunities* and *threats* present in the market.

I propose that we as information architects could only benefit from adding this kind of analysis at this stage. The tools I mention here are only a sample of the most common ones, but I invite you to research further and discover what fits best for your team and projects.

Strategy

Again, some common points: both disciplines start by defining clear goals for the project and then figuring out what part of the



overall audience will work best as a design focus. Both end by setting up the boundaries of the project, what it will contain and how it will reach the intended audience. But in this stage communication works on an explicit strategy, and here's my other key invitation: why aren't we working on a clear and explicit strategy? I know most of the IA books talk about strategy, but they don't set a plan to *design and articulate a clear strategy that will help keep focus on all future design decisions*. The strategy building process that Communication uses gets distilled into two key concepts:

- **Central Communication Concept**, which defines *what* you will say.
 - “With MC you can buy anything”
- **Central Creative Concept**, which defines *how* this is going to be said in order to achieve the best results.
 - “There are some (PRICELESS) things that money can't buy, for everything else, there's MC.”
 - And this can be presented in an *emotional* or *humorous* tone.

In my search for similar use of strategy in Information Architecture, the most valuable piece I've found is an article by Christina Wodtke on Boxes and Arrows, where she remarks the need to work on an explicit strategy, which she calls *shared vision*:

“It captures the **essence** of what you hope to **accomplish**.”

“**Reminders** of a shared vision are invaluable”

“...if we incorporate vision into our work, our work is more **targeted**, more **effective** and more **meaningful**.”

“... the vision must be **clear, meaningful and shared**.”

Christina's *shared vision* fulfills the same role as the communication strategy.

Design

At this stage, we see that Information Architecture becomes a lot more complicated and diverse, and this time, I'll focus on the similarities instead of the differences.



I like to compare the task of developing labeling systems with the copywriting that goes on in the advertising world, both of these involve reducing larger pieces of content into shorter bits, which in the case of navigation labels, many times are constrained to a single term. In my copywriting classes we had an exercise where we had to shrink a text to half its size in iterations; I like to think of labeling systems as the ultimate example of this. Layout design and Information Design as we know it, are basically the same playground, they both feed on the same principles and attack the same problem.

It is finally all finished with the layer of visual design that most of us don't really take under our own hands but always works best in collaboration.

Testing

Once we think our project is near completion, we have to test it. I know in the case of IA testing is an iterative process that should start as early as possible, and that focus groups and usability testing are very different kinds of animals, my point is that both processes imply a testing stage with your audience, in order to refine before going out live in masse.



Wrap-up

I've laid out some of the main reasons why I believe that we can gain a lot from looking more often at Communication Theory as a way to feed our rationale, and adopting some of the tools used in the field of communication into our projects. I invite you to think of your next project in terms of what you want to communicate and how your decisions relate to that message, to incorporate some analysis tools in your initial research, and

especially to develop an explicit and articulated strategy to guide your team in the design decisions.

As a closing quote, I'd like to share with you the first clue that made me realize that I was not alone in this position, I found this many months into working in organizing my ideas around this and it was written by the time when I was graduating from Communication school, back when people used to talk about websites in terms of homepages, it captures the basic premise of my proposition:

“A home page is a **communication** device. This implies that home pages should/could/might be **usefully analyzed** from within **communication theory**...”
Denis Hlynka, University of Manitoba. April 1996.

Thanks!

Resources

Books

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