

The Multiplicity of Communication

Peters' Complaint

“Communication” in much contemporary discourse exists as a sort of ill formed, undifferentiated conceptual germ plasm. Rarely has any idea been so infested with platitudes. (p. 6)

Two dominant discourses

- Technical
- Therapeutic

Peters: “Miscommunication is the scandal that motivates communication in the first place.” (p. 6)

Some Etymology

From the OED: imparting, conveying, that which is communicated, interchanges of speech (incl. dialogue), personal intercourse, sexual intercourse, channel or connecting passage, line of communication, common participation, quality in common, Holy Communion, rhetoric, (and combined with other terms).

A dominant dichotomy

- Interpersonal (1938) (or dialogue or face-to-face)
- Mass (1920s) (or mediated or distant or technologized)

Peters: “Communication as a person-to-person activity became thinkable only in the shadow of mediated communication.” (p. 6 again)

Plato's Complaint

“You know, Phaedrus, that’s the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter’s products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever.”

And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.

Phaedrus (1961 version, p. 521)

Key Problem

- The vast in-between
 - e.g., “the interweb” (but not just)
 - public and private

Dissemination is all we have...

“a matter of faith and risk”

“Whatever ‘communication’ might mean, it is more fundamentally a political or ethical problem than a semantic one.”

-- Peters, p. 30