On a New Approach to Problems of Communication

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A considerable growing interest in the research of communication processes is a distinctive feature in the development of the contemporary humanities. Projects are executed to study specifics of communication in the fields of education, industrial production, politics, and other social spheres; to study special features of interaction between students and educators in various cultures; to study styles of communication in the classroom; to study the nature of intercultural conflicts and ways of resolving those, etc.

We can identify the following major causes of the interest shown in those subjects:

1. a steep growth in the number and complexity of contacts, including contacts with representatives of other cultures;

2. the virtualization of the information space due to the fact that information, virtual images of objects, persons and processes lose all connection with the real images;

3. the globalization of the information medium as expressed in the situation where if in the past the interested person read newspapers, magazines, or watched TV, or listened to the radio, thus receiving his individual picture of the event – now he can address the electronic media system providing him with considerably finalized quantitative and qualitative conclusions that have been reached on the basis of the entire aggregate of the pertinent publications and broadcasts;

4. emergence of conceptually new communication formats: Web 1.0 – as production of content by a small group of specialists for the purpose of subsequent use by the mass of the Net users; Web 2.0 – as an independent content production by a mass of users and an active exchange of information among them, emergence of social networks; Web 3.0 – as creation of advised services in the Net, formed exclusively according to consumer opinion.

As specialists were trying to investigate the complicated empirical situation a great number of approaches were suggested to analyze the communication processes. It resulted in the emergence of a multitude of scientific directions and disciplines. One of them has been termed as "communication science".

In my opinion, the notion of communication science would be suitable to denote the entire complex of the scientific branches and practical applications, which describe, explain and develop the methodological provisions for the communicative activities of man and social systems. The thesis is illustrated in Figure 1 below.
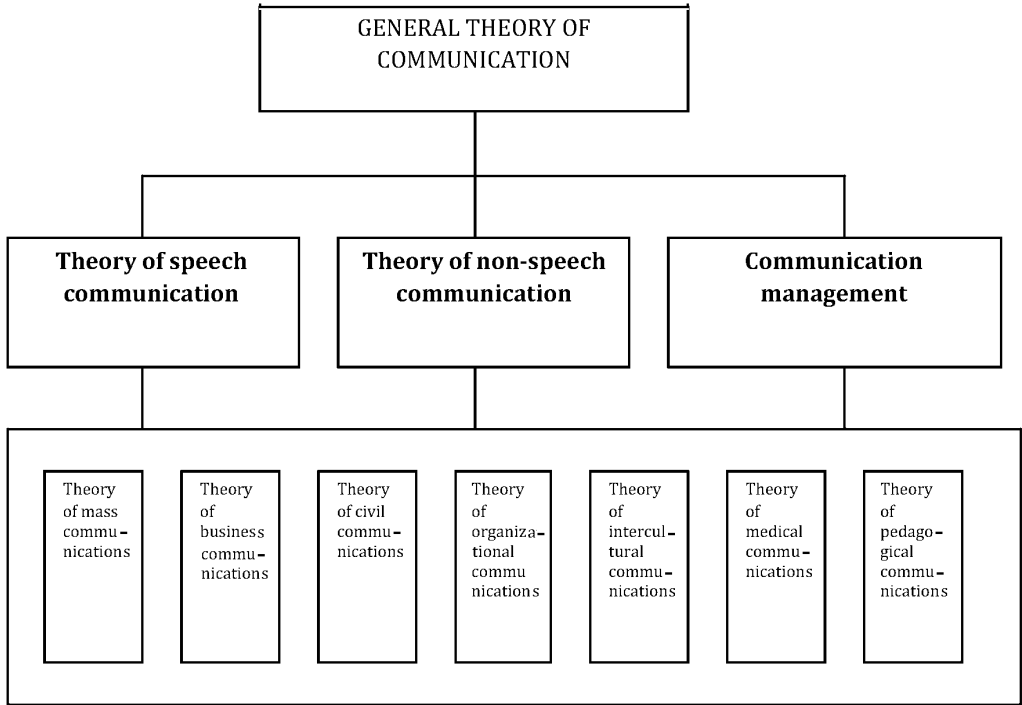
Figure 1. "Communication Science": An interdisciplinary complex

There is hardly a need to prove that each one of the specific communication theories shown in the diagram comes to be realized sooner or later in applied methodologies and recommendations. The value of any science is determined not only by the level of the theoretical generalizations it suggests, but also by the field of its inferences application, by the field of its practical recommendations for society as a whole. And this is the reason why there exist in any contemporary science two main levels of research: the theoretical one and the applied one. We can state that in the research of communications there has come to be crystallized – side by side with abstract, theoretical notions which are thoroughly distanced from concrete reality – knowledge which is directly focused on the study and resolution of practical collisions of communication behaviors.

Although there is no agreement as to how to term this applied branch of communication research, the available precedents of forming the applied

communication science allow us to suggest the following general wording as a tentative definition: ***applied communication science is a complex of scientific disciplines investigating specific communication situations with the purpose of developing practical advice and recommendations to serve as means of raising efficiency in communication***.

Conceptual framework of applied communication science

I would like to set out in this article a hypothesis regarding the main subject of applied communication science: it is advisable to consider in this capacity various regulators which determine the communication behavior and the reciprocal communication expectations of the subjects of communication. Various scholars use various notions to define the regulators, such as: principles, norms, rules, discourses, conventions, codes, and formats.

The notion of **"discourse"** (*"discours" in French, from the Latin "discursus" meaning "deliberation," "reason in discussion"*) is the most often used these days and is translated in dictionaries into Russian as "speech," "address," or "deliberation." In theoretical human self-reflection though, discourse is understood most often as a tool serving not only for appropriation of reality by way of "a discourse", but also for constructing standard-setting models – perception frameworks and behavior scenarios. To recapitulate, discourse is both a process and its result (as represented by the established methods, rules and logics in the discussion of a subject). Given this assumption, "discourse" is considered as a way of arrangement of reality, a vision of the world, which has settled and become consolidated in the language, and which is being realized in most diverse (and not only verbal) practices, and, therefore, not merely reflects the world, but also designs and creates it.

Any discourse belongs in institutional communication performed in public institutions and making an important integral part of their functioning.

The main parameters of institutional discourse are:

- a set of communication situations (speech events) which are typical of the particular sphere;
- a notion of the standard models of the speech behavior when specific social roles are played;
- a specific (limited) set of communication subjects, a specific set of intentions and respective speech strategies.

An active use is also made of the notion of **"convention"** which serves to denote the forms of interaction, including interaction by speech, which are accepted in a given society (and which are regulated by the same society.

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If we mean social conventions which regulate the initiation of a certain act of communication, it would be suitable to see the communicating people as members of certain social hierarchical strata, which are clearly or vaguely defined, such as:

- head/administrator/employer – subordinate worker;
- senior rank (such as in the army) – junior rank;
- teacher/master/lecturer – pupil/apprentice/audience;
- parents/adults – children;
- leader – a group of people;
- owner – tenant;
- host – guest.

The word **"code"** is fairly often used in order to denote the rules of communication. Kluyev writes on the subject the following: "The code of communication is a complex system of principles which regulate the speech behavior of both parties in an act of communication, and which are based upon a number of categories and criteria. (There may arise the following question: how does the communication code relate to what has been defined as speech conventions? The notion of the communication code is broader in this sense, and it regulates speech conventions, among other categories)".

The notion of "**format**" has come to be extremely often used lately. In Latin "format" means "appearance, external form." This term entered the printing profession in the 18th century to mean "the size of the publication, the size of the printed sheet." The term came to mean at the time a definite standard size, a standard in the printing industry. The notion has come to be used later by computer people to denote certain parameters, properties and options that can be used for certain types of computer programmes. The derived notion of "formatting' has thus come from the computer lexicon to mean the following: 1) to erase old information and to install new software; 2) to shape the text into a definite predetermined form, for example: *to format the text to centre, to the left or to the right.* In both meanings of the verb "to format" the core element is preserved – "structure, paragon."

In the opinion of Surikova, "it was this very actualized seme of "standard," "paragon" that made it possible for the notion of "format" to become so active in the everyday theory and practice of mass communication at a time when their status of paragons and standards was lost by the notions "mass media type," "genre" or "style," the ones that used to reflect the systemic nature of the phenomenon. So the word is becoming trendy…

This coincidence of linguistic and extra-linguistic causes could, in our opinion, result in a situation in the field of mass communications when "format", staying short of displacing the above notions, came to be used at least as their modern and trendy synonym conforming to the linguistic taste of the time. This is witnessed by both the contexts of its use and by its word combinations".

Without going into any analysis of the above categories I will state my position. To my mind, the notion of **"matrix"** is the most adequate term denoting all kinds of possible regulators of communication. The notion had existed long before the release of the movie entitled "The Matrix" and it carries quite a definite meaning. The word is a derivative of the Latin "matrix" and is used in the Russian language to denote tools for stamping and printing for a metal plate with an in-depth straight depiction of a letter or a sign, to be used as a molding box to cast letters. This meaning – a mold that determines the parameters of an object – provides quite ample opportunities for using this notion.

The notion of **"communication matrix,"** as manifested in discourses, conventions and codes, is the most adequate term to denote systems of knowledge, values and norms, determining the specific nature of communication for various subjects in various situations, and making it possible to tie the systems with the overall social situation. The idea is reflected in Figure 2.
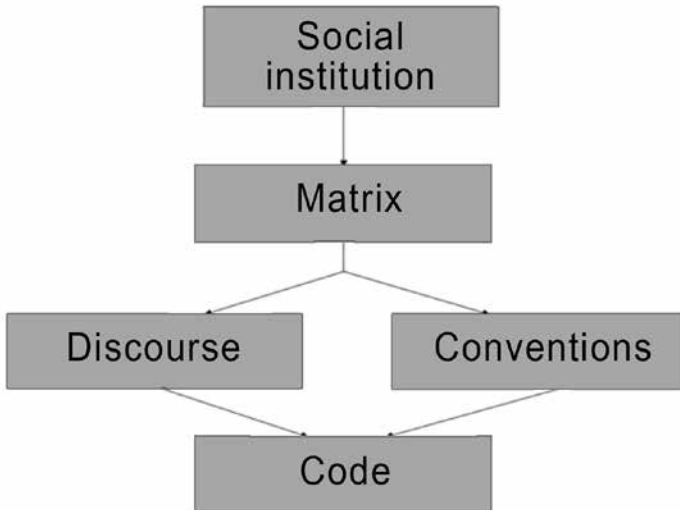
Figure 2. Communication matrix: A system model

Types of communication matrices

The numerous communication matrices can be divided between three main groups as follows: vertical, horizontal and hybrid matrices.

The vertical matrix:

- subjects of communication are distributed along a vertical line (parents – children; chiefs – subordinate workers; the national state – subjects);
- state dominates in most communication processes;
- access to information is made difficult by a multitude of special standard-setting acts;
- the right to free expression of personal opinion is not realized in practice.

The horizontal matrix:

- partnership relations exist among subjects of communication;
- the feedback mechanism is well-adjusted;
- the right to free access to information, the right to freedom of expression, the right to personal choice of communication channels – all these are provided by the legislation and are actually practiced.

The hybrid matrix:

- subjects of communication are distributed by classes inside which there exist horizontal relations, and vertical relations exist among the classes;
- partial access is secured to various data stores, but access to a considerable section of the data resources requires special permission.

All the three communication matrices coexist now in Russia. The hybrid matrix is the basic one while the vertical and horizontal versions are complementary.

As it is functioning in the media space, the communication matrix is realized as a **media matrix**, i.e. as a summation of more or less rigid norms and rules, according to which the mass media product is created. The media matrix is operational at every stage of journalistic and editorial activities: when selecting the news reports, when choosing the news genre, etc.

The media matrix is branching in its turn into several varieties providing for realization of the various tasks of mass communication. We can identify roughly such media matrices as journalism, commercial advertizing, and PR, among others.

The fact that mass media as a social institution and journalism as a type of social activities operate according to standards and rules, which depend on the specific nature of the social system, was revealed to specialists in the work of the American sociologists Fredrick S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, entitled "Four Theories of the Press" and published in America as long ago as in 1956. Describing these standards and rules as "theories of the press," the authors have distinguished four pertinent theories: authoritarian, libertarian, the theory of social responsibility, and the Soviet theory (Communist).

McQuail had added two more to these press theories: the model of developing countries, and the model of democratic participation. Now, according to a theory of Raymond Williams, a mass media system may be authoritarian, paternalistic, commercial, or democratic. A mass media system is authoritarian when the main task of the communication is seen as transfer of instructions, ideas, and approach patterns, emanating from the ruling group. The paternalistic system is an authoritarian model, according to which the ruling group retains however its responsibility to society, regarding values and aims which are beyond the frameworks of the requirements for holding the ruling power. Although the commercial system differs from both the authoritarian and the paternalistic ones by a greater degree of internal freedom, "it has its own limitations emanating from the difficulties of receiving profit from certain types of communication": one can say anything, provided one can allow himself to speak, and to speak with a profit. Williams was not able to find an actual example of a democratic model of mass media, hence it became for him a system of principles by which one should be guided, rather than a set of specific suggestions resting on accumulated experience (Sparks & Reading, 1998).

In Russia the problems of mass media type classification was studied extensively by Akopov, Resnyanskaya, Shkondin, and many other scholars. True, what they most often were looking for was an efficient classification system of mass media, which would make it possible to create a semblance of the Mendeleyev periodical system whose squares would house all possible types of mass media.

My approach to analyzing the types of mass media and journalistic writing was formulated for the first time in 1988 in an article published in the journal "Slovo lektora," now unbethought. It was set out henceforth in several other my publications of the Perestroika era. Still later my ideas were expressed more or less clearly in my book "Rossiysky journalist v posttotalitarnuyu epokhu" (Russian Journalist in the Post-Totalitarian Era) as well as in other publications.

The essence of my approach was in my affirmation that there co-exist within the frameworks of the Russian professional journalistic culture several alternative paradigms of professional activities, which differ from one another in all their components, including the moral-ethical one. They all are accommodated

in a kind of "space" that is formed by three vectors as represented by the fundamental socio-professional precepts which determine the general character of a journalist's attitude towards his audience.

The first such precept places the journalist above his readers or his listeners, thus determining his right to view them as the object of control (of educating, of teaching), putting the journalist himself into a position of a carrier or a transmitter of control (administration) programmes of various types and various levels. If we try to define with a single word the ultimate destination of this journalist's work, the word would be "influencing."

The journalist practice of this kind has received its sufficiently fundamental substantiation in the works of numerous theoreticians and researchers, who have created a complex of well-built concepts, which are perfect in a way, the concepts of governing influence resting on the notion of the active role played by the mass media which act as the subject of propaganda, complemented by the passive (despite the numerous reservations) role delegated to the audience which is considered as the object of ideological, propagandist influence.

The second precept places the journalist side by side with the audience and orients him towards relations of informing. In this case the journalist considers it as his main professional duty to provide his audience with various types of information in which the audience is interested, various data and materials; he also sees it as his task to help the audience to formulate their opinions.

Both these precepts, despite the substantial differences between them, result in alienating the audience from the mass media.

The third fundamental precept demands that the journalist stays amidst a certain human community, and that he should consider himself as an involved and interested participant of a search, undertaken jointly with the audience, for solutions to the problems of life. The main idea of such journalism consists in that the journalists should consider readers, viewers and listeners not as a background, not as passive onlookers, not as victims of circumstances, but as participants in solving important problems. This type of journalism is self-determined in such terms as "humanitarian," "personalized," "communitarian," as participatory journalism, etc.[1]

It is the "dialogue moderator" who assumes the principal function/role in the journalism of the latter type. This means that journalism can and must create the medium for an equal dialogue among various social groups – no matter how much they differ in size or in their ideas, purposes or types of association – in the course of which dialogue social contradictions or conflicts may be resolved. Journalism can and must unite in a single information space contradicting

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[1] Detailed technology of dialogue in mass media is provided in the works by L. Resnyanskaya, A. Grusha, E. Prokhorov.

opinions and ideas, which, having become accessible by public, may find precisely in that information space ways of coming together, or find at least arguments to prove their own correctness. This function is particularly requisite in a society which is being torn apart by conflicts and which is split into opposing camps, in a society which cannot find reconciliation in city squares and public rostrums. This is a function that is capable of turning a conflict destroying unity, into a conflict which identifies the problem, and is thus capable of bringing closer its resolution not at the level of a street scuffle, but from positions of reasonable and pragmatic public dialogue.[2]

What is the situation in the Russian mass media if we use the above classification?

The first group, the mass media of influence, owned by the state and by corporations whose main task consists in providing influence upon the public opinion and upon the population behavior stereotypes, is represented by the most powerful and the most well provided communication resource. It is well known that at the present time most regional and up to 80% of the municipal newspapers in Russia have been established by the state and municipal government agencies. It influences the editorial policies of these publications, and reduces their economic independence, because all of them are subsidized, in a number of manners, from the regional and local budgets[3].

The mass media of the second group, which are usually termed as commercial because they are oriented towards profit-making from satisfying the interests and needs of the audience, are doing fairly well too. Research data for the past ten years allow us to think that they have fair prospects for development. The advertizing market is growing by leaps and bounds as the unpretentious mass audience is swallowing with satisfaction the content which is not of a very high quality.

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[2] Detailed technology of dialogue in mass media is provided in the works by L.Resnyanskaya, A. Grusha, E. Prokhorov.

[3] Data obtained in the course of various research projects show that the relations between the authorities and mass media in Russia are self-determined either in terms of submission and subservience, or in terms of war. A third version of dialogue or partnership somehow fails to materialize. At the provincial level people in any stage of authority often show a lack of desire to take account of the nature of mass media as an independent social institution, they tend to turn journalists into their servants whose duty should be to perform errands given by people at the top. Local authority chiefs see local press primarily as something like an additional information-analytical service or as a PR department. Local press is not considered by the local authorities as a controller and a critic of their actions. Given all the differences in age, education, and life experience, heads of regional and local administrations see so often mass media not as an independent institution of civil society, and not as a special and relatively independent information business, but exclusively as an information-and-propaganda appendix of the Administration. Many of them are inherently convinced that journalists' work consists in helping them, leaders, to solve problems that they face.

The commercialization of the mass media has resulted however in many of them having ceased to conform not only to their informational task, but also to perform their proper cultural, educational and other functions. The absence of civil society traditions and the exclusion of the population from the political process resulted in a situation where the commercial mass media have to cater to the rather limited interests of their audience, mostly household and entertainment interests, which are also interpreted quite liberally by the managers of the media businesses.

The third group of the mass media which pose as a social institution protecting the interests of society against the authorities and against the capital power, is insignificant by its size in the overall number of mass media, and its destiny is hardly enviable.

These proportions of the various types of mass media are not incidental. Nor are they the result of someone's evil will or of lack of professionalism. Most probably, these proportions are determined by the peculiar features of that very social system for which the services are provided by the mass media. But this is another topic for discussion.

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