

The art of communication

Looking into the future is an interesting exercise, by turns intimidating, unsettling and always complicated.

I recently had an opportunity to gaze ahead when asked by the World Future Society to speak about the future of communications. The World Future Society is, as it sounds; an organization dedicated to looking to the future, and not just at technology and science, but how society and the individual will be affected by change. Their annual conference was in Toronto in July with delegates from around the world gathered to predict and discuss the future.

My background is not technology, though my career has been a study of communications, people and change. So I thought at first it was an odd request. But it turns out they weren't just interested in talking about the technological wonders of artificial intelligence, robotics and bio-electronic functions. They also wanted to explore the idea of communications, in the human and technological aspects.

A stretch assignment, for sure, but one that gave me the opportunity to examine the fundamental aspects of communication, what makes it effective, what erodes good communication and what enhances it. And, of course, what will be the human approach and response to changes in communications practices and technology.

It's a topic that matters now and one that will matter very much in the future.

Whenever the subject comes up, it seems we always start talking about the toys. How fast and how far will miniaturization go? When will the trend to multi-function devices culminate in the single, tiny, communications device? The second coming of convergence—in gadgetry.

When we start talking gadgets, we start talking about improving our ability to communicate. We'll be able to communicate even more ubiquitously than ever. And faster. We'll be able to store vast amounts of information more portably.

So how will that impact our ability to communicate?

As I pondered this question, I started to wander away from technology and

wonder how will we feel about all of this and how will we use it to our advantage?

How have changes in communications already affected us?

When I started working, there were telexes, not faxes. Phones were answered by humans. The ubiquity of personal computers was just a gleam in Bill Gates' eye. Work evolved at a much slower pace and in a more deliberate fashion. You had to think ahead and allow time for letters to be delivered, packages to be sent.

Then came e-mail with its powerful capability to connect us, to transmit information, not just to one person at a time but tens, hundreds even thousands. I love the ability e-mail has brought to keep in touch with so many people, the way it has, in a fashion, revived the written word, atrocious spelling aside.

But has it made us more productive? More effective?

What it has most certainly done is made most everyone feel besieged.

Complaining about the endless stream of e-mail is as universal as complaining about the weather. People feel there's an entire e-mail "job" that's been added to the "real" job. Senders want answers immediately. Between the cc's, bcc's and reply-alls, e-mails bounce back and forth like a crazed pinball.

Just giving the equivalent of a conversational nod can require slogging through umpteen volleys of point and counterpoint. You're tempted to delete without reading, but then you can just



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hear the plaintive wail, "But I sent you an e-mail!"

I concluded that perhaps there is a mistaken notion that connectedness equals effectiveness.

It's like the paperless office. Computers were going to rid us of paper forever and we know how that one went. E-mail was supposed to make us all so much more efficient and effective, freeing up endless amounts of time for other, more important tasks.

So as I gazed into the future, I saw a well-known truism: the more things change, the more they stay the same. Good communication transcends the medium. Bad communication is just amplified by faster and wider delivery.

The poet Shelley described it best, past or future. His quote is a description of an aging relative, but what he said seems highly relevant to our current struggle with information overload. His aged relative, he said, had "lost the art of communication, but not, alas, the gift of speech."



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