

CHAPTER 16 COMMUNICATING

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Key points:

- Communicating involves the circulation of information in its broadest sense.
- Communicating is core to our existence as social beings: society cannot exist without it.
- This is because we depend on shared frameworks of understanding in order to make sense of society and locate ourselves within it.
- Communication is ubiquitous. As social beings we communicate through written and spoken language, through images, body language, art and music, as well as through our movements.
- Communication is *symbolic*, relying on sign systems like language.
- Communication is also *material*. It is dependent upon physical structures like data cables and server farms, and corporate entities like Facebook and Google.
- It would be impossible to cohere a sense of collective national identity without modern mass media.
- Our times present us with a paradox: we have more opportunities to communicate with more people in more places than ever before, yet the digital platforms that enable this are concentrated in the hands of a few Big Tech companies.
- We are not simply customers on social media platforms, we also generate valuable data which is sold on to advertisers and marketers.
- The real product these firms provide is therefore not a communication platform, but a surveillance platform.
- This has led to calls to regulate tech giants, to nationalize social media platforms or to develop a new digital commons that belongs to everyone.

Key words: algorithm, communicative power, digital media, fake news, imagined community, interpellation, mass media, social infrastructure

Algorithm A set of rules or a process to be observed in calculations or other problem-solving actions, particularly by a computer. Algorithms are used increasingly to replace human decision making, especially in handling big data. Sociologists are concerned that algorithms influence ever-greater areas of social life, and that they reflect the values and interests of their (corporate) creators.

Communicative power A term associated with Jürgen Habermas that denotes popular sovereignty, based on the shared ideas of the people. This is undermined by the concentration of digital media ownership among a handful of 'Big Tech' companies.

Digital media Media encoded in machine-readable (computer-readable) formats. This content that can be created, watched, distributed, altered and archived on digital electronic devices. It includes digital video, video games and social media.

Fake news A form of news – spread via traditional (print and broadcast) or online social media – that deliberately spreads misinformation. There are two drivers of fake news: the desire to damage the credibility and fortunes of opponents, be they individuals, political parties or corporations, and the desire to attract a greater audience to enhance advertising revenues.

Imagined community Benedict Anderson's term for (national) identity. It is a socially constructed community, imagined into existence by the people who see themselves as members of it. In reality this seemingly real community is only abstract and believed real because of mass media.

Interpellation The ideological processes through which individual subjects are 'hailed' into social interactions. The manner by which the individual comes to act in socially appropriate ways (as defined by the authorities).

Mass media Those media technologies concerned with mass communication to large audiences. This includes broadcast media which transmit information electronically via media such as television and film, and Internet media that comprises such things as email and websites.

Social infrastructure Buildings, places and organizations that shape social interactions. Robust social infrastructure facilitates social bonding and community cohesion. It therefore enhances quality of life.

Cross references to: Chapter 1: On being sociological; Chapter 4: Dividing; Chapter 8: Becoming; Chapter 9: Racializing; Chapter 10: Gendering; Chapter 17: Consuming; Chapter 19: Mobilizing; Chapter 20: Impacting

Introduction

As I sit down to write this introduction, I am more acutely aware than ever of how fundamental communication is to our very existence as social beings. This is a guilty admission for someone who studies communication for a living. I write these words in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, under conditions of mandatory self-isolation. Many millions of people around the world are similarly more conscious than ever of their dependency on communication networks as entire populations move into a state of lockdown. What would the lockdown experience have felt like 20 years ago without the digital communication platforms on which people – that is, those who enjoy access to them – now rely? It is hard to fathom even for those of us plenty old enough to remember a pre-digital life. Being able to maintain our social connections during times of enforced distancing can save our sanity, and can even save lives. At the same time, for many people, those same technologies bring substantial social pressures from employers and educational institutions to remain productive while grappling with caring responsibilities or stressful domestic lives. The pandemic highlights in the starkest of terms how today's pervasive communication technologies can function as both a blessing (for some) that can make life more liveable, and as a burden that can exacerbate social pressures and inequalities.

In fact, communicating itself (and not just the means by which we do it) is a double-edged sword: it brings multiple opportunities and pressures. We are accustomed to thinking of communication as something inherently positive, healthy and empowering ('it's good to talk'). The linguistic root of the word 'communication' links it to words such as 'community' and 'communion'. It implies an act of sharing and bonding. But communication is by no means always benign. It's worth acknowledging at the outset that communication includes propaganda, lies, threats, hate speech and insults, just as it is also a key resource for achieving conflict resolution, promoting shared understanding, fostering good will and advancing knowledge in society. So in saying that communication is fundamental to our existence, that's not the same as saying it's inherently a force for good. Rather, it simply

means that it's an inescapable and essential part of our lives as social beings (see [Chapter 8: Becoming](#)).

As we explore the theme of communication in this chapter, there are three main goals. Firstly, readers are encouraged to think expansively about what communication actually is. This is important for the purposes of grasping its sociological significance. Secondly, we argue that we should think of communication in terms of *infrastructure*. There are two key aspects to this: on the one hand it means recognizing communication as a key dimension of society (basically, there *is* no society that exists separately from communication); on the other hand, it means recognizing that communication – this fundamental aspect of society – has a very *material* existence and is dependent upon physical structures (e.g. data cables, server farms and power grids) and corporate entities (e.g. Google and Facebook, as well as more traditional or 'legacy' media and telecomms companies). Thirdly, and following on from this, we want to open up the question of communicative *power* in the age of digital communication. With the rapid rise of digital platforms in the twenty-first century, we are confronted with a paradoxical situation: we have historically unprecedented opportunities afforded to ordinary people around the world to communicate, to access information and to express themselves; but we also have an immense concentration of power in the hands of powerful technology companies ('Big Tech') which increasingly monopolize the platforms and networks on which we depend in order to exercise these communicative capacities (see [Chapter 4: Dividing](#)). How can we make sense of these new forms of power and what are the possibilities for imagining a better future for social communication?

Ubiquitous communication

We are communicating when we speak or tap out a message on our phone. We also communicate through body language, and through expressive activities like playing music or producing an artwork. Communicating covers an inordinately broad canvas. Consider how many different forms of communication we might engage in on a routine weekday morning before uttering or writing a single word. For example: I look at my social media feed and hit the like button on a couple of posts. I stroke the cat who purrs back at me (because communication isn't something that happens only between humans). I think about the meetings I have on today and choose an appropriate shirt to wear (because our clothing communicates something, whether or not we want it to). With a spare 20 minutes before leaving the house I decide to rewatch the last part of a Netflix drama because I was too sleepy to pay proper attention last night (not only is Netflix communicating its content to me here, but I'm also communicating data back to Netflix's databases with every choice I make on their platform). When I get on the bus to work, I nod and smile a silent hello to the driver, then feel myself blushing as I stumble over a fellow passenger's bag (because sometimes we communicate involuntarily, especially through our body language). Speaking, writing, television, emojis, body language, sex, violence, computer code: all can be understood as forms of communication, which is not to say that this is the *only* way to understand them.

Economists routinely talk about the prices of goods and services as a system of communication that is essential to the functioning of a market economy: prices are 'signals' and money really does 'talk' in this sense. Animals and machines can communicate. Scientists have discovered that bacteria communicate (Popkin, 2017); and notice how the medical profession refers to certain infectious diseases as 'communicable'. If we look hard

enough, we can see communication almost anywhere we look. But for our purposes, when thinking sociologically about everyday communication, the key point is to recognize the many diverse means or 'media' through which communication takes place.

Communicating is not something only carried out by individuals. Firms, institutions, political parties, nations and community groups also communicate. This immediately raises issues of representation: who gets to speak on behalf of (that is, to represent) a collective social entity? Consider how often citizens feel moved to say that a president or Prime Minister does not speak for them when they make controversial remarks on the international stage. And who do journalists interview when they want to hear the views of a particular community or segment of the population? How are people selected as spokespersons for groups that don't have formal, hierarchical structures? These are important and complex questions of **communicative power** (Castells, 2013; see SHiP box).

Apart from the dizzying variety of means or media through which communication takes place, it's also useful to begin with a broad understanding of communication as a social process. Stripped back to its basics, communicating involves the circulation of 'information'. There is more to communication than the information itself, of course. Information is produced by social actors (whether individuals, groups or institutions) which convey certain meanings. So too, information is received by social actors who attempt to make sense of it (though, importantly, information is often interpreted in ways that differ from the intended meanings of the information producer). And, in today's densely connected world, social actors frequently move back and forth fluidly between the roles of information producers and receivers as part of complex social 'networks' (Castells, 2013: 21). But before we default to using 'information' as a convenient shorthand for discussing communication, we should pause to reflect on the broad array of things it can refer to.

Information does not refer only to facts or data – it should not be understood in a narrowly functional way if we want to cultivate a sociologically rich perspective on communication (Schement, 2002). We convey emotional information when we express our feelings. We communicate intentions, promises, expectations – these are all forms of 'information'. We communicate ideas, beliefs, opinions, prejudices – sometimes these are buried in ostensibly functional or factual information and sometimes we don't even realize we have expressed them. These are all socially-charged and not simply functional forms of information. And a key point here is that multiple types of information are routinely entangled together in everyday social communication. It is tempting to imagine that different forms of information each have their own places and their own processes: that emotional communication belongs at home but not in a business meeting, for example, or that journalists' opinions belong in opinion columns and not in hard news reporting. But social reality tends to be much messier than this.

Consider the following emergency alert message that was pushed out to mobile telephones across New Zealand on March 27, 2020:

Emergency Alert

NATIONAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY ALERT: From 11:59pm tonight, the whole of New Zealand moves to COVID-19 Alert Level 4.

The message is for all of New Zealand. We are depending on you. Follow the rules and STAY HOME. Act as if you have COVID-19. This will save lives.

Remember:

- Where you stay tonight is where YOU MUST stay from now on.
- You must only be in physical contact with those you are living with.

It is likely Level 4 measures will stay in place for a number of weeks.

Public emergency alert messages are, by definition, brief and to the point. Public messaging in times of emergency or crisis is a specific genre of communication with its own established conventions. The messages aim to communicate essential, life-saving information in the clearest and most concise way possible. Yet even here, a condensed and ostensibly functional message such as this contains more than just objective, factual information. It calls on us to imagine ourselves as a collective, as members of a single, national community – to think of ourselves as New Zealanders first and foremost. It hails us – or ‘**interpellates**’ us, to use the technical term (Chandler and Munday, 2011) – as New Zealanders in the hope that we might identify with this national community and accept the duties that our membership bestows on us as superseding our identities as unique individuals with our own individual views on the matter, at least for the duration of the emergency. Aside from the key factual information it conveys, the message asserts governmental and legal authority (for example, the all-caps ‘YOU MUST’) and combines this with a moral appeal (‘we are depending on you’). I pick this example because it shows how even a very specific, formalized and ostensibly functional mode of communication can embody multiple forms of information: it doesn’t simply transmit information but also enacts certain social processes such as the assertion of authority and the moral appeal. Most everyday social communication tends to be richer and messier still than this simple example.

Communication as infrastructure

I’ve argued so far that we need to adopt an expansive view of communication, one that acknowledges multiple means and media, the entanglement of multiple forms of ‘information’, and densely connected communication networks in which social actors (individuals, institutions and collective groups) move fluidly between the roles of information producers and receivers. Once we acknowledge this complex notion of communication, it is easy to see how communication runs continuously through almost every conceivable facet of social life: through politics and government, for example, through economic activity (buying and selling, but also advertising and public relations), through creative and artistic activities, and through interpersonal relationships. We can go further than this, however, and argue that not only is communication a pervasive and important

component of social life and social structures but that it plays a foundational role in the very constitution of society.

Raymond Williams in his classic text *Communications*, argues that:

Society is a form of communication, through which experience is described, shared, modified, and preserved ... [W]e have been wrong in taking communication as secondary. Many people seem to assume as a matter of course that there is, first, reality, and then second, communication about it. (Williams, 1976: 18–19)

By this, Williams is not making the absurd claim that society is nothing more than communication; in fact, Williams is a materialist (Fuchs, 2017). Rather, he means that without communication there *is* no society. We cannot understand society as something that exists prior to and independently of communication. Communication is the very lifeblood of society in the narrow functional sense that information flows are essential to the workings of businesses, policing, education and pretty much every conceivable social structure that depends on coordinating the actions of multiple human actors. But it is also foundational in the sense that we depend on shared frameworks of understanding in order to perceive and make sense of ‘society’ and our place within it (see [Chapter 1: On being sociological](#)).

As historian Benedict Anderson’s (1991) work has argued, the development of modern nations and nationhood is tied historically to the development of newspapers, literature and other forms of media that allowed populations dispersed across large territories to begin comprehending themselves as members of a singular ‘**imagined community**’ (though the history of colonialism reminds us that this doesn’t mean modern state-building depended on the universal assent of subject populations or was achieved without violent coercion.) And when politicians discuss the state of ‘the economy’ they are using an abstraction that only makes sense to us because we develop shared understandings (through media, through economics lessons and so forth) that allows us to grasp in rough terms what this otherwise intangible and unfathomably complex thing is. ‘Public opinion’ is another abstraction that we can’t ever grasp in its unmediated totality: but through debates, polls and other mechanisms, public opinion has a real and meaningful social existence. Nations, economies and public opinion have very material aspects and consequences, of course: patrolled borders, factories, poverty, the election of governments that implement specific policies and so forth. The point is not that complex social structures are pure fictions that exist only in our collective imagination because we communicate about them. But they do not exist first and then get described and discussed second. The very existence and reproduction of these social structures is premised on shared social understandings that arise through our communication about them.

It makes sense, then, to understand communication networks as a form of ‘**social infrastructure**’ (Klinenberg, 2018) to the extent that they are part of what makes complex modern societies viable and livable. In recent times, **digital media** platforms (including social media, online search engines and data companies) have become integral components in this. In contemporary society, lack of access to digital communication services generates significant forms of social disadvantage, cutting people off from important information services, public debates, economic opportunities and new forms of community and social support (Ragnedda, 2013). This is why governments are increasingly treating digital connectivity as an ‘essential service’ in times of crisis and campaigning organizations around

the world are lobbying for Internet access to be treated as a basic human right (Reglitz, 2019). The realization of communicative rights is, today, critically dependent on access to material resources: not just the devices and the Internet and data services we interface directly with, but also an underlying layer of digital infrastructure.

We don't typically think about the underlying infrastructure which enables our everyday communication through digital networks, at least not when these technologies function smoothly. But a sociological perspective demands that we pay attention to the otherwise invisible materiality of digital communication. Consider, for example, that global Internet connectivity depends primarily on a network of undersea data cables that are owned largely by telecomms companies and which require ongoing maintenance and repair (Starosielski, 2015; Holloway-Smith, 2018). In Aotearoa New Zealand we are critically reliant on just three such cables to connect us to the rest of the world (and primarily upon just one: the Southern Cross Cable that runs between Takapuna beach and the coast of New South Wales). Consider also the environmental costs of digital networks that generally receive little attention: online server farms are powered primarily by fossil fuel and online video stream generates 300 million tonnes of CO₂ per year; if every Internet user sent one less email, it would save almost 16,500 tonnes of carbon emissions per year (Griffiths, 2020), (see [Chapter 20: Impacting](#)).

Our capacity to communicate is sufficiently central to our lives that we typically hope not to have to think consciously about it most of the time, just as we'd prefer not to have to consciously think about breathing or turning on the tap to access clean water (neither of which are universal privileges, of course). In the everyday churn of social life, however, communication does routinely become a matter of conscious concern; it becomes a problem to grapple with. Technology crashes; you run out of data for your phone; a prisoner anxiously anticipates their one weekly five-minute phone call; a person with a disability works for years with a speech therapist to acquire communication capacities that most of us take for granted; a misunderstanding causes you to unintentionally offend your boss or a loved one; a newspaper columnist publishes a racist article that perpetuates harmful stereotypes; a political leader risks sparking an international incident with an angry all-caps tweet about North Korea.

While much of our everyday communication proceeds smoothly enough that it can recede to the background of our consciousness, communication is also precarious (at constant risk of breaking down), often harmful or dangerous, and frequently constitutes a 'problem' that demands our conscious concern. Thinking of communication as social and material infrastructure helps us to appreciate that there are critical dependencies which underpin it. One vital aspect of this is our critical dependency on the technology firms that own and control the platforms on which we now rely so heavily for our communicative practices. The most high profile of these are the so-called GAFSA companies: Google (and its parent company Alphabet); Amazon, which is not only an online retail behemoth but the dominant owner of the web servers that drive Internet traffic; Facebook, the social media firm that also owns Instagram and WhatsApp (at the time of writing, at least); and Apple (Galloway, 2018). In historical terms, their dominance has emerged rapidly and recently, and we are only just beginning to reckon with the consequences. But what kinds of power are being wielded by these firms? This is the question I want to move to in the next section.

Communication and power in the digital age

It's common to hear that, in its relatively short history, the Internet has had a 'revolutionary' impact on the way we communicate, one that is comparable in scale to the transformations wrought across Europe when the Gutenberg printing press unleashed mass publishing from the fifteenth century onwards (Naughton, 2012; Briggs and Burke, 2009). Gutenberg's printing press played a major role in upending the power structures of the time, challenging the Catholic Church's authority by allowing knowledge to be dispersed to an unprecedented extent and helping lay the foundations of modern democracies. But as well as the dissolution of old forms of power, mass printing played a major role also in the establishment and consolidation of new power structures including the rise of the modern state. So too the Internet (in its still relatively short history) has clearly been a catalyst for both dispersals *and* new concentrations of power; it has undoubtedly democratized communication in many ways while also enabling the rise of new communicative power structures.

This tension between the dispersal and concentration of power has been integral to the Internet since its inception. The Internet's very existence derives in the first place from US military power (Levine, 2018). Beginning life as ARPANET in the 1960s, a new decentralized communication system for intelligence-sharing was developed using a technique known as 'packet-switching', whereby information is transmitted by breaking it down into chunks that each find the most efficient way of travelling through a communication network in order to be reassembled at the destination. Compared to a simple linear 'Point A' to 'Point B' transmission, packet switching was designed to be efficient by avoiding bottlenecks in the system, and to be robust so that, when damage to the network occurs (for example, if the network is damaged in a military attack), information packets could simply route around the broken section of the network. This would become a core operating principle of the communication network we now know as the Internet.

While the Internet emerged as a tool for state power, the computer scientists responsible for developing the technology were based in US universities such as MIT, UC Berkeley and Stanford. According to Internet historians, many of those who became involved in its development did not see themselves building a technology to support US imperial hegemony. Far from it, they were enthused by the prospect of building a communication network that had no controlling centre, and were inspired more by *anti*-state values of the 60s and 70s counter-culture than by any commitment to building up US state power (Turner, 2006). The Internet opened up new opportunities for information to flow freely and horizontally between peers, in radical contrast to the top-down structures of traditional **mass media** (the press and broadcasting industries) that had hitherto seen communicative power concentrated in the hands of an elite.

While the Internet remained a niche technology for much of its early life, it started becoming mainstream in the 1990s. A key turning point was the development of a new Internet protocol known as the World Wide Web which made using and navigating the Internet a more accessible 'point and click' affair based on a system of hyperlinks and browsers, and which allowed for the integration of multimedia content (images and sounds alongside text): this increased user-friendliness and accessibility led people at the time to equate the Internet with a rapid democratization of information and communication. Moreover, the underlying technology was itself rooted in values of openness and dispersing power. The protocols for the World Wide Web were created by Tim Berners-Lee, a scientist at CERN, the nuclear research facility in Geneva. Famously, rather than seeking to profit

from his innovation, Berners-Lee decided to make his new protocols open source, so that they were not privately controlled and could be developed and improved by a global community of computer scientists.

Alongside the popularization of the web, email was also becoming a progressively mainstream communication medium in work and domestic spheres, while contributing to blurring boundaries between them. But unlike email, the early web remained a predominantly one-way communication tool. While many ordinary people, including hobbyists and activists, started publishing online alongside governments, organizations and established media companies, the web still functioned primarily as medium for *publishing* static content and allowed for very little of the interactive communication that social media platforms would later afford us. In the early-to-mid 2000s, new kinds of web formats began emerging that allowed for more interactivity. So-called 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly, 2010 [2005]) included formats such as blogging platforms which allowed for simple editing and user comments, and wikis (of which Wikipedia is the most famous) which allowed for distributed forms of collaboration. YouTube and Facebook, which both launched internationally in 2005, were also emblematic of these new, more interactive and 'conversational' formats. As reflected in media coverage of the time, much of the hype surrounding these developments centred on the claim that communication and media were being radically democratized. Anyone now, in principle, could be a media producer or publisher: we were no longer merely passive consumers of media but 'prosumers' (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Ritzer, 2013), as one of the new buzzwords of the era had it (see [Chapter 17: Consuming](#)). In 2006, the front cover of *Time* magazine famously declared the winner of its annual 'person of the year' as 'You,' illustrated with a computer displaying YouTube.

But while this cultural excitement was swirling around, a transformation was occurring in the economics of the online communication sphere that was decidedly less democratic in its consequences. A small number of Silicon Valley firms – which had initially emerged as small, 'disruptive' start-ups – began to cement their position as dominant players in many countries. Google began to dominate the search engine market. Facebook crowded out early players such as MySpace to become the dominant social media firm. YouTube began to monopolize online video and was acquired by Google in 2006. And Google and Facebook between them began to monopolize the online advertising markets, placing traditional or 'legacy' media firms under great strain in the process. Subsequently, Amazon rapidly became the dominant force in the web server technologies that drive Internet traffic. Between them, these firms began to constitute an Internet 'oligopoly' (that is, domination by a small number of firms). Apart from their dominant market positions, the services provided by these firms were running on proprietary technologies, that is, **algorithms** and source codes that remain jealously-guarded commercial secrets and closed off from public scrutiny. Apple also became part of this trend as its proprietary app platform led to more and more online content being routed through its closed digital ecosystem rather than via the open web.

Nonetheless, until quite recently, a sense of democratic optimism remained dominant in public debates about the Internet. The ostensibly decentralized nature of the Internet and social media was seen as a boon to democratic movements as it allowed for relatively spontaneous and non-hierarchical forms of political organizing (Shirky, 2008; Rheingold, 2002). Social media were seen to play a significant role in the Arab Spring uprisings of the early 2010s (see [Chapter 19: Mobilizing](#)). And online campaigns, such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, exemplified the important role that the Internet can play in

addressing issues of social injustice (see [Chapter 9: Racializing](#) and [Chapter 10: Gendering](#)). Some critics, however, were rightly cautioning against over-hyped accounts of technology's impact (Morozov, 2013) and overly romanticized accounts of 'spontaneous' and apparently non-hierarchical forms of social organization and communication (Dean, 2009), a critique that goes back to the counter-cultural ideals of 'structureless structures' that apparently inspired many of the Internet's early innovators (Cohen, 2018).

Critical commentaries on the worrying accumulation of power in Silicon Valley have been around since well before the widely publicized scandals involving Facebook and **fake news**. For example, before Google and Facebook even existed, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1996) argued that the entire sector was being built on a 'Californian Ideology' which celebrated libertarian individualism and disdained the idea of social 'restraints' on innovation and profit-seeking – an ethos nicely reflected in corporate slogan of Facebook in its early days: 'move fast and break things' (Taplin, 2018). And there have been well-developed critiques of Google's market power (Vaidhyanathan, 2012) and the commercial secrecy that protects the far-from-neutral algorithm (Hancock, Metaxa-Kakavouli and Park, 2018) driving its search results from proper public scrutiny.

But more widespread public scepticism toward digital communication platforms has ramped up since 2017 when Facebook became implicated in controversies surrounding fake news and propaganda in the US presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum. This has been accompanied by a growing tide of publications written by former Silicon Valley insiders, disavowing the industry that they once believed would be a force for improving society but which they now see as part of the problem (for example Wiener, 2020; Liu, 2020). Even Tim Berners-Lee, the architect of the 'open and democratic' web, has declared himself 'devastated' to see his original ideals in tatters in today's Internet (Brooker, 2018).

While it is easy to despair that the Internet is now fatally broken – an irredeemably toxic piece of social infrastructure – the growing scepticism of recent years can be viewed as a source of hope. For example, it is now increasingly understood that we (the users of these platforms) are not the 'customer'; that Google and Facebook, in particular, are actually advertising and data analytics firms and we, the users, generate valuable data ('insights') when we interact with their platforms which are then sold on to the real clients (advertisers and marketing firms); that the real product these firms provide is not, contrary to appearances, a communication platform but a surveillance platform (Zuboff, 2019); that fake news, hateful content and invasions of privacy are integral to the very business models on which these platforms are based, that is, that they are a feature, not a bug (Vaidhyanathan, 2018); and that the algorithms driving digital platforms, far from being neutral tools for distributing information, reflect social biases and prejudices and do more to exacerbate social inequalities than to reduce them (O'Neil, 2016; Pasquale, 2016; Eubanks, 2018).

To the extent that there is growing public awareness of how our current online communicative infrastructures are at the mercy of corporate imperatives, it is now at least possible for society to begin the process of debating and re-imagining a digital communications infrastructure that better serves the public interest. In the wake of Facebook's public relations disaster in 2017, CEO Mark Zuckerberg (2107) published a lengthy manifesto hubristically entitled 'Building Global Community' in which he vowed to reduce the amount of fake news and hate speech on the platform in favour of promoting high quality content. In that manifesto, Zuckerberg explicitly describes Facebook as 'social infrastructure', the very term we have been using in this chapter. If we take that claim

seriously – and there is good reason to do so – we should ask ourselves whether reforming our digital communication platforms might be too important a task to be entrusted to powerful corporations (see Sociological solutions box).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have addressed the theme of communication in three key ways. Firstly, we have emphasized how communication is everywhere in our society; it is ubiquitous. As social beings we communicate not only through written and spoken language but also through images, through body language, art and music, and even through our movements, our consumption of goods and services, and our physical appearances – and these are all aspects of our lives that are increasingly logged and monitored by corporations and state agencies in order to analyze and influence social behaviour. As a corollary of this, it is important to recognize that we routinely communicate unwittingly and not just consciously and intentionally. Communicating entails the circulation of information through communication networks that are, in contemporary society, complex and densely configured. Furthermore, a sociologically rich conception of ‘information’ includes more than just functional data with a specific use value: the sociology of communication also takes us into the messy domain of expressive and emotive communication, and information that enacts (rather than merely describes) social processes, including assertions of authority and the hailing or ‘interpellation’ of subjects into the ‘we’ of a community or society.

Second, and following from this, we considered how communication is more than just a vital part of our society. Rather, it is *constitutive* of the social: society is, of course, more than just communication but without communication the concept of society makes little sense. Communication, in other words, is an integral part of our social infrastructure. In today’s society – and this was the third key aspect of our discussion – digital technologies have become a critical part of this social and communicative infrastructure. Digital platforms have opened up unprecedented opportunities for more democratized and unregulated forms of communication. But ownership and control of these platforms has become intensively concentrated in the hands of a few powerful players whose technologies, far from being neutral information distribution systems, are having deleterious social consequences and have become embroiled in political and social controversy and contestation as a result.

SHiP: Power

communication networks, 'gatekeepers' are those with the capacity to shape the flow of information and ideas (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). State-sanctioned censors represent perhaps the bluntest and most direct form of gatekeeping power. In liberal democracies, personnel associated with professional media organizations have been of central concern to studies of gatekeeping. Editors wield the power to commission, to accept or to spike a story. Journalists continuously make decisions about which elements of a story to include and prioritize, and which to exclude or downplay, as well as which sources to approach for interviews and comment. Regular and official go-to sources (government or police spokespersons, for example, or political pundits) also shape how information circulates and how stories are told. Some media proprietors (Rupert Murdoch, for example) are notorious for meddling in the editorial decisions of their news outlets; advertisers too sometimes exert pressures. The fact that commercial media outlets are ultimately answerable to shareholders suggests also that gatekeeping powers can be exerted in more complex, indirect, yet pervasive ways.

Without doubt, the gatekeeping landscape has shifted in the digital age. Audiences themselves routinely exercise certain editorial powers in the curation of their social media timelines (Goode, 2009). Underlying this, however, digital communication platforms have now become prominent gatekeeping powers in our society. Some of this power is exercised directly and manually: Facebook, for example, employs an army of content moderators – who work under notoriously poor conditions (Newton, 2019) – to enforce its 'community standards' policy, a policy that has led to vigorous censorship of partial nudity on the one hand, and an horrifyingly lax attitude to far-right extremism on the other (Wren, 2018). But a new and more opaque form of *automated* gatekeeping has also emerged in the digital age. Why does Google's search engine give such prominence to Holocaust denialism and conspiracy theories (Cadwalladr, 2016)? Probably not because Google is ideologically in favour of those views. More likely it's the quirk of an algorithm that's been designed to maximize advertising revenue. Similarly, the propensity for Facebook's algorithm to propagate racist and sexist content (Biddle, 2019) and downgrade stories about anti-racist protests (Tufekci, 2014) does not tell us much about the political views of Mark Zuckerberg. Something more structural and opaque is going on. These new forms of automated gatekeeping power are insidious and we are only slowly beginning to understand their nature and their consequences.

SOCIOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS: RESISTING TECH GIANTS

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, we've seen an immense concentration of power in the hands of a few corporations that now control large swathes of our digital communications infrastructure. By 2019, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon and Alphabet (Google) had become the four largest corporations on Earth, with Facebook ranked sixth (Forbes, 2019). Can we do anything to resist their power over our lives?

There's nothing inevitable about the sheer extent to which communication technology has colonized our time and our attention. Spending less time on our devices, appreciating the value of cinemas, physical libraries, outdoor spaces and face-to-face conversations is a healthy choice if and when those opportunities are available to us. But individual lifestyle choices offer limited scope for resistance. Even if we radically reduce the time we spend online (a choice that's not equally open to everyone), we do not escape the grip of these corporations: digital communication technologies are increasingly built into the institutional fabric of our society, including government agencies, educational institutions, entertainment industries and retail firms. Collective projects and structural changes are required in order to fundamentally change things (see [Chapter 19: Mobilizing](#)).

One possible strategy lies in campaigns for ethical reform. In 2018, a hashtag campaign emerged on Twitter (#DeleteFacebook), urging people to delete their Facebook accounts in protest over the fake news and propaganda scandal surrounding the 2016 US presidential election (Hsu, 2018). And there have been examples of organized campaigns by employees of the Big Tech firms. For example, Google workers have staged protests against working on military intelligence projects funded by the US Pentagon (Shane and Wakabayashi, 2018); and an international coalition of digital tech workers was formed in 2017 to promote social justice values in the sector (Tech Workers Coalition, 2020).

Others, though, are pushing for more structural solutions to the problem of communication platforms dominated by profit-driven corporations. The European Union has brought in increased regulation of digital communication and data firms and there is growing pressure for such regulations to be deepened and extended to other countries (BBC, 2020). These strategies aim to reduce the extent to which tech firms can act against the public interest (for example by facilitating fake news or hateful content) and to place some limits on their monopoly powers. But they leave the foundations intact. Are there more radical solutions?

Nationalizing the most powerful firms (that is, taking them into public ownership) is one proposed strategy (Srnicek, 2019): advocates recognize this would be a complex undertaking, given the international reach and influence of these platforms. Others look to the development of genuine alternatives to the current search, social media and data behemoths, alternatives that would be open source, open to public scrutiny and 'decommodified' (Tarnoff, 2019) to serve the public interest rather than profit motives. Some advocate for cooperative models of digital platform ownership (Sholz, 2014; Platform Cooperative Consortium, 2020). Others argue that governments need to invest heavily in building a new 'digital commons' that belongs to all citizens (Common Wealth, 2020: 9–10).

The solutions may not be simple. But together, these efforts to reimagine the future of digital communication show us that another world is possible.

Suggestions for further reading

- O'Shea, L. (2019) *Future Histories: What Ada Lovelace, Tom Paine, and the Paris Commune Can Teach Us About Digital Technology*, London: Verso. Shows that there are lessons and inspiring examples from history that can help us think critically and creatively about the future of digital communication technology.
- Greenfield, A. (2017) *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday life*, London: Verso. Greenfield argues that our experience of the everyday world is primarily mediated by networked digital IT. He offers a critique of the colonization of everyday life by digital technologies like smart phones.
- Vaidyanathan, S. (2018) *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, New York: Oxford University Press. Explores the reasons why Facebook's dominant position has had detrimental social and political consequences.

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