Changing Attitudes in Communication: The Tradition of the *Vermittler* from Oral to Print to Cyberspace

Donald R. Sunnen, Virginia Military Institute
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<u>The Position of the *Vermittler*</u>

Along with the concept of communication, which seems in modern times so often to be the object of efforts to expropriate it and make it more "efficient", the role of the intermediary (I prefer the German term *Vermittler*, because it has a wider meaning than "transmitter") needs to be addressed. Most particularly, the practice and purpose of textual transmission has changed immensely over the past several hundred years with the establishment of a print culture. The *Vermittler* has a key position in the communicative framework. I wish to widen the concept even further to one who interprets the message and involves him/herself in the process of communication to the point where this participation is not only significant, but welcome in the sense that all participants – across space and time – feel connected by means of the tale.

We must ask ourselves this question: if the space where communication takes place is defined and occupied by the original sender and receiver of the message (or story), where does the *Vermittler* fit? I find this to be an apt image of the "intrusion" of the interpreter/translator and of the often unreasonable expectations placed on him. He cannot go to one side or the other, and yet he cannot fill the space either.

> Es gibt zwei Übersetzungsmaximen: die eine verlangt, daß der Autor einer fremden Nation zu uns herüber gebracht werde, dergestalt, daß wir ihn als den Unsrigen ansehen können; die andere hingegen macht an uns die Forderung, daß wir uns zu dem Fremden hinüber begehen und uns in seine Zustände, seine Sprachweise, seine Eigenheiten finden sollen.[i]
> [There are two principles of translation: the one demands that a foreign author is brought over to us so that we will see him as one of our own; the other places the onus on us to go to our foreign source and find him in his own surroundings, characteristics and style of language.]

In the medieval mind-set, this problem was solved by the particular storyteller and audience enclosing the space; each represented not only the people present, but also everyone who had ever told or heard the story. The medieval code of communication recognized only one source for a story and the stories were chosen from a fixed corpus.

This effect is still sought today and represents a *sine qua non* of direct communication. We believe that the speaker or storyteller is speaking directly to us, even when he is broadcasting his words through television or radio. This perception of the message as "unrelayed" is the goal of any communicative act. The *Vermittler*, whether human or machine, is either transparent or is simply unnoticed. The idea that a story is to be interpreted and analyzed critically is informed by print culture. In the oral tradition the telling of a tale was seen more as a didactic and spiritual exercise rather than critical

or intellectual. The act of communication was not a transmission of information from one person to another, but a sharing of a text around which a community gathered. Brian Stock calls this phenomenon a „textual community".[ii]

The oral culture was one based on memory, not only that of the storyteller, but of the audience as well. Those who listened had heard the tale many times previously. The medieval and oral concept of authority is founded on the notion that the popular tales at court were linked beyond the scope of any human memory to a divinely inspired source (*auctoritas*) which is ultimately what held the respect and reverence of the audience. The oral tradition had no authors, only interpreters of honored tales. This allowed space for the translator in the communicative process, since the original author was represented wholly by the present performer, in a way similar to an actor's portrayal of a theatrical character. Eric Jacobsen (Translation: a Traditional Craft) interprets the absence of theoretical considerations in medieval texts as an indication of a strong tradition - so strong as not to need elaboration. It is, therefore, this *tradition* which needs to be investigated, rather than analyzing works individually.[iii]

Medieval vs. Modern Traditions: Oral and Written

If we refer to medieval customs and society, we must also take issue with the social order and the fixed corpus of narratives - who told what to whom, and under which circumstances. The relatively static nature of these contrasts strikingly with the much more fluid narrative space and customs of the modern "information age". Communication and information are not opposites, but they tend to move in opposite directions. When less information is available, communication - sometimes in the guise of myth - is the only way we have of making sense of our environment, as with the tales known to medieval storytellers and reaching back hundreds of years into antiquity. But we are deluding ourselves if we think that today's flood of information can help us understand our environment without our stepping into a space which we have reserved for reflection and discussion. Our medieval ancestors held many strange beliefs, to be sure, but they always reserved and held sacred a good deal of space – and time – for storytelling. We exalt our *Vermittler*, even though they convey facts, not truths. They seem to have extended the space in which communication takes place (as, for example, in contact both personal and professional – e-mail, online courses, and even humorous spoofs of the religious experience "enhanced" by cyberspace such as Garrison Keillor's "Lutherans Online"), but the intimacy and the reverence are gone. Joseph Campbell refers to the function served by literature in The Power of Myth:

> Greek and Latin and biblical literature used to be a part of everyone's education. Now, when these were dropped, a whole tradition of Occidental mythological information was lost. It used to be that these stories were in the minds of people. When the story is in your mind, then you see its relevance to something happening in your own life. […] These bits of information from ancient times, which have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don't

know what the guidesigns are along the way, you have to work it out for yourself.[iv]

I propose that these stories from Western classical tradition, with their high content of "mythological information", were once so much a part of everyone's life that no one spoke of "communication" at all in our modern sense of the term. The physical proximity of the members of a community and the arduous nature of travel brought about a situation in which a common experience and common references combined to make everyday life a form of communication, not unlike its meaning in Holy Communion – partaking of a shared ritual. In our modern usage, we speak of "communication" with reference to overcoming physical and verbal barriers. Continuing this line of thought, the storyteller of the Middle Ages served to underscore and celebrate the unity which already existed and assist the audience in probing the "inner mysteries". The tale was brought to life by a *Vermittler*, one who participated in a long and honored tradition. After the establishment of a written corpus of literature one began to see a definite separation. Deborah Brandt states:

> Yet there is another current that says to be literate one must be able to pull away from the demanding solidarity with the social world, to put deliberate space and time *between* oneself and others. "The book, like the door", writes David Riesman, "is an encouragement to isolation"(112). Readers, according to Myron Tuman, "require the psychological motivation to separate themselves from what they share with others"(31).[v]

Whenever I hear the word "communication" in my daily routine, it is at once a statement that it is not being achieved and an announcement – with varying levels of sincerity – of the intent to expropriate it and make it more "efficient". We have always required a *Vermittler*, though this role has changed immensely over the past several hundred years with the establishment of a print culture and the recent developments in electronic and computer-aided texts. In the oral tradition, the *Vermittler* represents his source (*auctoritas*) and competes with it (*certamen*) at the same time by adding rhetorical flourish. This was seen as constituting a somewhat vague sense of ownership, as St. Jerome refers to his translation of the Bible: "Read, then, my Samuel and Kings; mine, I say, mine. For whatever by diligent translation and careful emendation we have mastered and made our own, is ours."[vi] The stories and characters of the Bible, it must follow, belong to all those who have internalized them and made into a part of their experience. This is what Campbell means by stories existing "in people's minds".

The riddle we moderns must face with respect to the *Vermittler* is, however, that the source must be acknowledged, because printed texts have enabled us to separate the teller from the tale (or the informer from the information). The words now belong to a flesh-and-blood author, but they are brought to us by someone else. If we are trying to define the space where communication takes place, we can sum it up neatly in an oral context: we require a *Vermittler*, an audience and an invitation. But the dissemination of words, often in so many directions at once, obscures the straightforward exchange of participants in conversation. We have too many sources and too many *Vermittler* to be able to enjoy the common space. We have changed our notions of communication and

those with whom we communicate, and even how we communicate. We are aware of the distance between ourselves and the source, but so much information is coming at us that we cannot possibly deal with very much of it critically and need to have it summarized or digested. As human beings, we have an innate need to communicate, but all too often our resources – most particularly time and space – give out.

Our modern *Vermittler* bring us information in a never-ending battle to conquer time and space. James Carey sees this drive for control over long distances as particularly American, going back to the earliest days of the republic. The United States put its faith in technology early in its history, says Carey, as an intentional departure from the European experience. Coinciding with this control of space, however, is a connection through time. Carey contrasts these by using the words "citizen" and "patriot":

> Republics, then, are a tissue of relations in space and time, relations expressed in the basic terms of republican existence – citizen and patriot.
> To be a citizen is to assume a relation in space to one's contemporaries: to all, irrespective of class and kin, who exist in the same place under the canopy of politics as fellow citizens. To be a patriot is to assume a relation in time to the republican tradition: to the predecessors with whom one shares a patrimony. […] If republican unity was to be technologically achieved by way of the space-binding potential of communication, republican character and virtue was to be achieved by the time-binding power of oral speech and discourse.[vii]

If we are called to be citizens and patriots according to this model, then the fabric which holds us together is fragile and needs constant attention. As Mahatma Gandhi said, "There is more to life than increasing its speed". We need to realize that the same technology which brings us so much information also fragments our world and our experience so that we are often less in touch with one another. No matter what technology we have, we will never replace face-to-face communication or improve on the basis of experience and belief as the first step to forming a lasting connection between individuals.

In the oral tradition the source (*auctoritas*) provided the material and events of the tale, as a kind of template. Once a text became recognized as a repository of rules and other information, it came to stand on its own as a received authority. Stock refers to "facts not as recorded by texts but as embodied in texts" and "the separation of text and commentary"[viii] as revealing developments toward the end of the 12th century, well in advance of Gutenberg's invention. The more refinements were made – both before and after print – the more influence the written text acquired.

Scholarship in recent years has focused on the advent of multimedia in modern communication, with the Internet as the example *nonpareil*. As many of us look for historical antecedents, or anything with which to compare this development, those familiar with the introduction of print (as well as the period of transition which surrounded it) turn to the time when oral tradition became transformed by the availability of printed texts. We are reminded that the oral-to-written transformation did not occur suddenly and that both traditions coexisted and influenced each other for at least 200 years before the printing press.

Brian Stock focuses on the far-reaching effects of texts and their status as the new authority; the centralized storehouse of written documents is now (c.1200) the final arbiter of what is right, legal and acceptable. The comparison with the modern storage-and-retrieval facility, the computer, invites itself.

> When written models for conducting human affairs make their appearance, a new sort of relationship is set up between the guidelines and realities of behavior: the presentation of self is less of a subjectively determined performance and more of an objectified pattern within articulated norms. One no longer responds through inherited principles handed down by word of mouth. The model is now exteriorized. Individual experience still counts, but its role is delimited; instead, loyalty and obedience are given to more or less standardized set of rules which lie outside the sphere of influence of the person, the family, or the community.[ix]

Nowadays we speak of documents and files, but these are just baggage from the print era. The files are in our computer and can be stored as sound or written text. And while the authority was once defined as limited access, we now have almost anything we could possibly desire at our fingertips.

<u>Modern Media – Electronic Distribution</u>

In addition to the terms which have held sway from the age of print, we have "disseminate" and "broadcast", which once referred exclusively to the sowing of seeds in a farmer's field. These terms now refer to the world of radio, television and computer-assisted technology. This leap in technology, which James Carey defines as the separation of "communication" from "transportation" resulting from the introduction of the telegraph in the 1840s, has brought with it a number of jobs in the field of technological support; one is sometimes reminded of the famous Automat cafeteria in New York, where the appearance of high automaticity was belied by a hard-working staff of people who worked out of sight of the customers and who filled the shelves with entrees, salads and desserts. The notion that people are replaced and rendered obsolete by computers flies in the face of the constant need of computer users to contact another person who can coach them through a procedure.

Whatever the similarities between the change from oral tradition to print and the change from print to electronically facilitated communication, we have travelled very far indeed. Instead of an attitude of reverence and humility surrounding the presentation of a favorite tale, we now have a constant assault of information from countless *Vermittler*, both human and electronic. We may even have reached a stage at which everything in our experience is immediate (the German concept *unmittelbar* is particularly descriptive here, as it is both derived from and contrasts with the intermediary - *Vermittler*).

We moderns want facts and proof, but a medieval audience was much more comfortable with a familiar tale that left room for imagination. The relative paucity of facts in medieval tales (and relative anonymity of writers) helps to indicate the space which was respected and not filled with information. We are all familiar with contexts and situations in which we cheapen things by bringing them up for discussion, such as a deep and close relationship or a belief held as sacred and therefore beyond the pale of

conversation. This attitude is, in my opinion, not only applicable to the "high context" culture of the Middle Ages, but is present in modern reactions to perceived intrusions by the media. The *Vermittler* has to stand to the side of the space and open the door, as David Showalter puts it[x], as a good editorial or analysis of the news can do, by helping us understand and form thoughts which we didn't have before. Even a Presidential speech, which should be a direct form of communication, is treated as an event which needs to be reported on. We tend to dislike this routine, as we see the journalists as invading the common space opened up by the speech so that we hear their words and analysis rather than those of the President.

The *Vermittler*, over time, has become more than a person or function which transmits well-known tales. Goethe's Faust is an example of a story which began as a tale of a doctor trying to cure plague victims and then was remade into more of an autobiographical work. The practitioners of oral culture would see Goethe as a *Vermittler* who got too big for his britches and turned his attention to himself. Autobiography is a creature of print culture, but now modern technology has provided us all with iPods (see Andrew Sullivan's article "Society is Dead, We have retreated into the iWorld" http://www.timesonline.co.uk February 20, 2005), microphones and modems. Has instantaneous opinion-sharing (blogs) really improved communication? I think not. Technology alone cannot bring us together, nor is the speed of access necessarily a boon.

As a scholar of language and literature, I see communication as something at once commonplace and mysterious. It is all around us in both oral and written form, but what actually *happens* – what reveals the truth and brings the participants closer together – is so difficult to express that we are left with the ceremonies, such as they are today, of opening and closing of the space and we must use our own wits to make sense of what goes on inbetween. Instead of measuring and codifying communication as a technical concept, I would like to treat it more as an endangered species and concentrate on preserving its habitat, the common space. We insist today on communication as an illusion of control, while it is in fact beyond anyone's control. We have altered, perhaps even compromised, the common space by our distance media (telegraph, telephone, internet) and we need to reclaim it.

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[i] J.W. von Goethe, Aus Zu brüderlichen Andenken Wielands, quoted in Störig, H.J., Hrsg. Das Problem des Übersetzens. Wege der Forschung. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, p.45.

[ii] Brian Stock, Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U P, 1990.

[iii] Eric Jacobsen. Translation: a Traditional Craft. Classica et Mediaevalia, Dissertationes, VI. Copenhagen, 1958.

[iv] Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth. With Bill Moyers. Ed. Betty Sue Flowers. (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 4.

[v] Deborah Brandt, <u>Literacy as Involvement: The Acts of Writers, Readers and Texts</u>. (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1990) 1-2.

[vi] Preface to the books of Samuel and Kings, quoted in William Arrowsmith, "Jerome on Translation: A Breviary" in <u>Arion</u> ns 2 (1975): 367.

[vii] James W. Carey, <u>Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society</u>. (New York and London: Routledge, 1989) 4-5.

[viii] Brian Stock, The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U P, 1990) 62-63.

[ix] Stock, <u>Implications of Literacy</u> 18.

[x] "All of us, who rebelling in one degree or another within the confines of constitutional legitimacy and human decency, regardless of whether we like the association or not, have *one thing in common*. The violation of the human being by some kind of mechanism, in a fashion that is dehumanizing and degrading. *We have another thing in common*. The ability to shunt that incursion aside by putting our capability to control it to work. And we have one more thing in common. The means by which we accomplish that objective. *Communication*. At that point in the corridor of re-entry I would like to meet you at the door, hold it open for you, and hope that we learn something terribly important and useful to us - together." David R. Showalter, <u>How to Say It So They Hear It</u>. (Ann Arbor, MI: Ann Arbor Science Publishers, 1973) 10