Cockfights and Demographics

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As every American school child learns, the discovery of America in 1492 was disappointing. Christopher Columbus used maps, but they hardly prepared him for the discovery. Columbus’ maps rightly told him that he was sailing west from Spain. But they greatly underestimated the distance from Europe to Asia. In fact, North America did not exist on the maps. Columbus thought that he was headed for India.

So when Columbus arrived in North America he began naming his discoveries as if he were in Asia. He called the people "Indians." The Caribbean islands were now the "West Indies." The Spaniards were so pleased with Columbus’ new finds in "Asia" that they gave him major resources for a second trip: 17 ships filled with 1,500 workmen and artisans. He was ready to begin co-creating some culture in the new Spanish lands. But as Columbus continued to probe new areas, he grew increasingly baffled and frustrated. Where was the fabulous East?

Eventually Europeans figured out that the world was much larger than they had previously assumed in their undeveloped cartography. Each generation of new maps added more land and water to their picture of geographic reality. Later explorers determined that the West Indies were not in Asia. Improvements in timekeeping, cartography and astronomy helped them to create a more realistic representation of the globe.

The study of communication is like map-making. Scholars try to express their observations about communication in the form of theories or models that more or less match reality. In fact, like 15th-century European maps of the world, theories of communication are invariably imperfect representations of a complex process that is not fully within human grasp. Communication theories simplistically approximate a very complex and unpredictable process. God made us so wonderfully complicated that each of us cannot even fully understand ourselves, let alone others.

In this chapter, I summarize and critique the two dominant types of communication theories. Although the history of communication studies offers many worthwhile models, we argue along with James W. Carey that there are two major types—transmission and cultural theories.

First, I offer a few observations about the subjective nature of communication theory. Often scholars adopt a particular theory because it fits with their assumptions or motives, not because it is the most comprehensive or appropriate
theory.

Second, I describe the *transmission* theory of communication that comes largely from the social and natural sciences and defines communication in fairly *mechanistic* and *monologic* terms. This view of communication emerged prominently after World War II, although roots extend back at least to the 19th century, when mass communication became an important part of public life. Transmission theories usually quantify communication in a search for the rules that will make communication.

Third, I briefly examine some of the weaknesses of the transmission view of communication. I focus on the tendency in these models to disregard God, to assume that people are relatively passive communicators, to diminish the importance of human motive, and to produce exploitive relationships among people.

Fourth, I look at the *cultural* theory of communication that comes largely from the humanities and views the process as highly *interpretative*, *interactive* and *creative*. This book owes much to a cultural view of communication, which extends at least back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Although I side with this more creative cultural view, I recognize that it, too, has some major problems that potentially challenge a Christian worldview.

So in the last section I briefly examine the benefits and weaknesses of cultural views of communication. Although these theories tend to capture the creative nature of human communication, reflect existing culture, and recognize that communities depend on communication, they also tend to slip into cultural relativism.

Finally, I offer some thoughts about Christian theorizing. As we shall see, these two types of theories of communication assume a particular view of human nature and a particular approach to the practice of communication. I believe that the cultural view better captures the God-given complexity of human communication. But I also admit that even cultural approaches to understanding human communication are highly subjective and not always applicable to real situations. The communication theorist even today is like Columbus charging across the Atlantic with an imperfect map of a big, complex world of symbols.

**Mapping Reality for Fun and Profit**

Just as all people use communication to co-create culture, scholars use words and illustrations to co-create representations of the process of communication. And just like non-scholars, many different things may inspire theorists, including their faith in God, their drive for professional status, simple curiosity, and author
royalties on textbook sales (ouch!). There are many schools of thought about communication, each of which is almost like a distinct philosophy of religion. For example, there are Marxist and feminist theories of communication. There are even a few Christian theories of communication, as this book attests. In addition, there are theories that focus on particular forms of communication, such as small-group theory, mass communication theory and rhetorical theory. Overall, communication theory is a kind of hodgepodge of bits and pieces, mixed motives, and some remarkably helpful ideas.

Apart from various motives, communication theories serve two primary purposes. First, they are descriptive maps of human communication. In other words, theories allow us to understand how theorists understand communication, just as Columbus’ maps enabled him to understand how cartographers understand the globe.

Second, theories are prescriptive maps for communication. They suggest how we should communicate. To some extent, each communication theory is a verbal or non-verbal map designed to guide how people should communicate. When they are significantly accurate, theories can help us communicate. They then reflect God’s grace in our gift of theorizing. When they are inaccurate, they can get us into trouble. Normally Columbus’ maps helped him navigate his ships. When he ventured beyond the accuracy of his charts, however, he was lost. If we use the wrong maps or inaccurate maps of communication, we will find that we do not really understand the process.

**The Transmission View of Communication**

By the mid-1920s, many Americans were concerned about the impact of motion pictures on the nation’s youth. Religious leaders, journalists, community leaders and others criticized the film industry for producing movies that dealt with the same issues today’s movies address, including love, sex, violence and crime. As a result, a private, philanthropic foundation, The Payne Fund, financed a series of thirteen studies, conducted by well-known researchers, of the impact of movies on children. Over a three-year period, the researchers examined film content, audience size and composition, and the effects of children’s exposure to movie themes and messages. Published in the 1930s in ten book-length volumes, the Payne Fund Studies were the first major attempt to uncover scientifically the cause-effect relationships between media and audience.

The Payne Studies creatively developed a transmission view of communication as a means of understanding how the media work in children’s lives. The research presumed what nearly all social-scientific studies of communication assume: individuals’ values, beliefs and practices are more or less determined by external stimuli, or messages. In fact, the Payne Studies shaped how later
scholars would think about what communication is and how it works.

In addition, the Payne Studies developed research methods that are still widely used by communication scholars. First, they categorized and measured the content of films. Second, they categorized and measured audiences to find out how many children saw movies in the U.S., and how frequently. Third, they tested in laboratories, with follow-up questionnaires, what the children recalled about the movies that they were shown. Also using labs, they tried to measure how much the films changed childrens’ attitudes toward ethnic groups, racial categories and social issues. In some lab studies, the researchers attached electrodes and mechanical devices to young viewers to see how the movies changed their galvanic skin responses and breathing patterns. Fourth, the researchers created a standardized "morality scale" for "measuring the morals" of different young viewers. In essence, the researchers could correlate a viewer’s moral values with his or her demographics, such as social class. Finally, using elaborate questionnaires, researchers tried to correlate students’ movie-going with their school behavior, such as course attendance, general conduct and peer reputation.

The results of the Payne Studies and similar social-scientific communications research were both predictable and surprising. Of course they discovered that movies do have some impact on some children in some circumstances. Moreover, some of the impact was likely not good. For example, some children strongly identified with movie characters and imitated some of the behaviors of movie celebrities. Surprisingly, the more subjective, autobiographical studies, based on lengthy interviews with children, may have "revealed a greater richness and insight into the effects of the films than the ‘scientific’ studies." In other words, the more subjective and least "scientific" (i.e., least objective and quantitative) sections of the study seemed to bear the best fruit for researchers.

Ironically, then, the most revealing part of the Payne Studies probably had the least long-term impact. To many researchers of the time, it seemed like the study of communication could and should be a purely scientific enterprise. More than anything else, these kinds of early media-effects studies established the direction for a new field dedicated to mapping human communication scientifically within a more or less stimulus-response model. The new, social-scientific researchers collected and analyzed measurable data about senders, receivers and messages. They seemed to have figured out a means of studying a highly subjective process, namely human communication, very objectively. After World War II, much of the newly emerging discipline of communication anchored itself in the assumptions and methods developed in the Payne Studies. All types of human communication, from interpersonal to group to organizational, but especially mass communication, developed mechanistic, sender-receiver models as parts of "systems" designed to map how communication affects people. As in the
natural sciences, the goal was *predicting* what would occur in particular communication situations, such as how violent movies affected children.

The social context for the rise of this type of scientific communication research is particularly telling. First, from World War I into the 1930s and ‘40s, Americans were increasingly concerned about totalitarianism, especially the possible impact of communistic and fascistic propaganda on free nations. Would it be possible, they wondered, for a totalitarian nation to undermine Western democracy through mass communication? After all, the War brought propaganda to the attention of interested and fearful citizens. Political propaganda even became a subject for public discussion, and various popular writers published exposés of war propaganda, including biographical accounts of its chief practitioners. Using engineering-like models and statistical analysis, the new kind of communication researchers hoped to protect free society by revealing the real impact of totalitarian propaganda.

Second, Americans expressed growing optimism about the role of science in discovering truth and improving society. Professions such as engineering and chemistry were making enormous gains in applying scientific findings to everyday American life. Could mass media research also furnish society with scientific information? After all, other "subjective" fields, such as sociology and psychology, were claiming success at constructing scientific approaches to the study of human behavior. The stage seemed to be set for the development of a purely scientific discipline of communication.

Third, the needs of mass marketers, especially advertisers and broadcasters, matched the interests of the emerging field of mass communication research; both business and the academy sought to know how mass media affected consumers, and the advertisers and broadcasters were increasingly willing to provide the finances for communication research studies. After World War II the advertising and broadcast industries, in particular, developed elaborate models for testing and predicting the impact of messages on advertisers. Pilot TV programs are nowadays tested on sample audiences. New advertising campaigns are test-marketed in selected cities. The transmission view of communication even led to the rise of a new business discipline called "consumer behavior."

Fourth, the rapid growth of mass media, from newspapers to movies and then radio, deepened public concerns about the impact of "popular culture" on individuals in society. In fact, the term "popular culture" took on increasingly negative connotations. Some scholars and other critics of the media differentiated between lowly popular art, on the one hand, and the better, more authentic "folk" and "high" culture, on the other. They criticized popular culture inherently as standardized, manipulative, stereotypical and superficial. And they
directed their criticisms not just against the media messages, but also against the
media systems that produced and distributed popular fare.

These four historical contexts—the post-War fears of totalitarianism, the growing
faith in applied science, and needs of mass marketers, and the rise of critical
attitudes toward popular culture—all fostered the new, social-scientific approach to
the study and practice of human communication. As the Payne studies illustrated,
researchers were developing fairly simple cause-effect map of the way
communication supposedly works. In mass media studies, the map was called
alternately a "hypodermic needle" or a "bullet" theory. It posited that mass-
mediated messages directly affect how individuals behave. It viewed mass
communication within a mechanistic, sender-receiver model and assumed that
audiences are relatively passive and easily affected by print and broadcast
messages. In fact, the sender-receiver model looks amazingly like the stimulus-
response views of behavioral psychology. This type of theory assumed that what
people do and believe is more or less a product of incoming message stimuli. In
short, the study of communication in this transmission view became a social
science intent on objectively measuring and predicting the impact of messages
on more-or-less passive people.

In spite of many studies that showed that communication is not so powerful, the
basic idea of communication as "senders influencing receivers" has never
disappeared. The simple cause-effect concept was simply too attractive, and
apparently too quasi-scientific, to abandon. No matter how many studies have
proven otherwise, many scholars still believe more or less in a scientific
metaphor of human communication founded on the idea that messages make the
person. To put it rather starkly, most models of communication still assume that
"we are what we receive." Humans are merely the product of their symbolic
environment. Communication is control. And communicators are supposed to
manipulate others.

According to this perspective, the purpose of communication research is to
predict what factors produce particular effects among receivers. Transmission
models of communication analyze demographics and other "factors" that
supposedly determine the effect of a given message on a particular person(s) in
specific situations. Researchers try to manipulate measurable factors in order to
predict how the changes will affect receivers. The transmission view is most
prevalent in mass media research, but is used in all sender-receiver models that
use terms such as encoding, decoding, static, noise and feedback. These terms
for communication were derived from the idea that communication is the
transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control. As
two communication researchers put it, "'Control' is basic to science, starting with
the control arising from rigor in statements of problems, of concepts, and of
conceptual schemes and hypotheses. Science means controlled observations
and/or experimental methods that may be replicated by others." The transmission view assumes that the purpose of communication is sending messages across geographic space for the purpose of control—what the media seem to do pretty well.

As it turns out, this idea of a simple cause-effect view of communication is deeply embedded in Western culture and long predates the field of mass communication. Scholar James W. Carey discovered the origins of this scientific view of communication in American Protestants’ missionary rhetoric. He concluded that Protestants saw mass communication as a means to "establish and extend the kingdom of God, to create conditions under which godly understanding might be realized, to produce a heavenly though still terrestrial city." In other words, developing a science of communication became an evangelistic enterprise. Protestants had a biblical reason for learning how to communicate effectively around the globe: spreading the Gospel. In fact, Protestants led in developing new mass media, from the Gutenberg Bible during the Reformation to the book and Bible tract publishing of early 18th-century America. Protestants combined the physical language of control with their own religious rhetoric, eventually creating an effects-oriented theory of communication with evangelistic promise. If Carey is correct, Protestants invented the modern communication theory that eventually became the backbone of the mass-persuasion industries. The transmission view of communication, in turn, became the basis for advertising and public relations. In a sense, a theory for evangelizing people became a magic formula that would supposedly reveal how to get people to purchase soap, wear particular clothes, vote for a political candidate or select a movie to view. In fact, nearly the entire social-scientific approach to the study of communication now assumes the secular purposes of marketing and propaganda. The movies and television programs became the secular "evangelists" of our time.

This may help explain why the transmission view is used so widely in popular books and self-help literature. All of the faddish material about "dressing for success," "persuading anyone to do anything," and "winning every argument" is based largely on the simplistic bullet theory. Every year bookstores are flooded with the latest titles that seem to promise the reader great success at manipulating people with verbal and nonverbal symbols. The business of self-help communication tends to offer almost magical insights that will give the average person mysterious powers.

The Limits of Scientific Maps of Communication

From a Christian perspective, these transmission views of communication suffer serious drawbacks. First, transmission models of human communication eliminate God from the process. They offer no room for supernatural presence or intervention in human culture. They tend to be "closed" models that assume all of
the dynamics of communication take place within a definable system of senders, receivers and other measurable factors. If we assume that God still speaks, and that people still listen to God, a closed system is inadequate for mapping what can happen in human communication.

The mystery of grace suggests that we will never be able to account for everything that happens when we communicate. We will always experience serendipitous events that defy scientific explanation. As long as God is present, even as Spirit, communication is an open and somewhat unpredictable process. Assuming that God is active in history, communication theories must consider the Creator’s role in co-creating with people a "new heaven and a new earth."

Ironically, when Protestants began devising systems of mass evangelism, they often focused on the impact of human technique instead of on the power of God. Especially in early America, mass evangelists such as George Whitefield refined dramatic techniques and rhetorical strategies that would "guarantee" conversions. They viewed "soul winning" as a human-oriented enterprise. In the process, Protestant evangelists inadvertently secularized their view of communication.

Second, transmission theories also wrongly assume that humans are relatively passive "receivers." These models emulate natural science, where test tubes and other laboratory media enable researchers to manipulate and control all physical reactions. They fail to recognize that human communication is not like a predictable chemical in a test tube, because human beings creatively interpret symbols. No one can forecast with certainty what will happen in a conversation. Even formulaic mass media messages elicit very different responses from individuals and groups. In the early days of mass media effects research in the United States, social scientists were stunned at how little impact media seemed to have on people. They eventually tried to create more complex models than the older hypodermic needle view of communication. The researchers added more and more "factors" that might help predict how receivers would be affected. Of course people are influenced by messages from others, but any map of communication that diminishes humans’ symbolic creativity oversimplifies the process. Our communication is dynamic. The image of God in us makes us remarkable co-creators of culture.

Third, transmission theories usually diminish the importance of human motive in communication. One of the classic examples is Harold Lasswell’s famous research question for studying mass communication: "Who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect?" On the surface, Lasswell’s four questions are all reasonable and important. But what happened to perhaps the most important question of all: "Why?" Why do we communicate? Motive is a crucial aspect of human communication. In fact, the study of ethics generally emphasizes motive as worthy of close assessment, since it usually reflects what
is in a communicator’s heart. Because motive seems so subjective and immeasurable, it evaporates from most transmission theories of communication.

I suggest that a Christian theory of communication must include intentionality. People do not just "misunderstand" each others’ messages. They also intend to say and even believe contradictory messages. Because of mixed motives, we create messages that overlap, conflict with and undermine each other, with no apparent way of reconciling the symbolic mess. Why do some people call in to radio talk shows and write letters-to-the-editor? What motivates people to ask for forgiveness? Motive is important because God made us as people who try to conform the world to our desires. In short, our communication often is an attempt to shape culture in tune with our own motives.

Fourth, transmission models of communication tend to produce exploitative relationships among people. As I suggested earlier, models of communication are also models for communication. When we study communication as a means of manipulation and control, we create cultures that promote symbolic exploitation. Our communities even encourage monologic communication in which senders try to manipulate receivers. In this kind of culture, product marketers and political propagandists see their only purpose as manipulating audiences.

I believe that dialogue and mutual respect should be part of a genuinely Christian view of communication. The concept of "transmission" focuses too strongly on the idea of selfishly controlling the receiver. Theologian John Bachman argues, "Transmission does not provide for the exchange which is essential to genuine communication, and violates God’s creative provision for human freedom." In other words, transmission models of communication can rob us of our dignity, grace and mutuality.

Transmission views of communication sometimes reflect the way people interact, but they cannot fully address the scope and variety of most human communication. The more that we technologize our theories of human communication, the less human they really are. The concept of transmission captures little of the dialogic complexity of real-life human communication. It also misses much of the joy of improvisational and serendipitous interaction. These kinds of models, based ultimately on manipulation and control, leave little room for inexplicable grace.

Why, then, are transmission views of communication so widely reproduced in textbooks and self-help literature? Surely their simplicity is appealing. Maybe they reflect the general belief that quantification is scientific and powerful. Perhaps transmission models even offer hope that human beings can improve their lives, relationships, and businesses by controlling others. In a sense, these theories
distort our human calling as caretakers of creation. They appeal to our urge to dominate our neighbors rather than serve them.

Clearly we should not identify too easily with transmission views of communication. These mechanistic maps of communication can suffocate shalom by encouraging us to think about communication as a means to use others for our own gain. As we shall later see, a Christian approach to communication must include a responsible use of the power to persuade others. Otherwise we become pragmatic social engineers dedicated merely to increasing market share, manipulating co-workers or impressing friends. We might even find ourselves counting souls for Christ as if the numbers refer to baseball scores, stock-market reports or the latest hog futures. Community is more than demographics, income statements and technological power. Communication is far more than senders, receivers and effects. In its search to measure communication objectively from "outside" of peoples' minds, the transmission view simplifies and distorts a co-creative, dialogic process. The Cultural View of Communication

When anthropologist Clifford Geertz decided to study cockfights in the culture of Bali, he took an unusual approach. Geertz suspended his Western beliefs and scientific worldview. He stopped being an anthropologist for the sake of joining the Balinese culture. In other words, Geertz took on the way of life of another culture. Through the gift of identification, he became more or less Balinese. He communed with the culture and uncovered an elaborate ritual.

Balinese cockfights are held in a 50-foot-square ring and begin late in the afternoon and run through sunset. Each evening program includes about ten separate matches. Before each match, various men enter the ring with their birds and seek an opponent. Once two of them make a match, all of the men clear the ring and the opponents affix razor-sharp, pointed steel spurs to their cocks’ feet. Finally, the handlers place the two cocks in the ring for the fight. Usually the cocks fly almost immediately at one another in "a wing-beating, head-thrusting, leg-kicking explosion of animal fury so pure, so absolute, and in its own way so beautiful, as to be almost abstract, a Platonic concept of hate." All the while, the audience watches silently, packed around the ring and cheering on their favorite bird with hand motions, shifting shoulders and turning heads.

Cockfights, Geertz concluded, are a Balinese art form. The fights symbolize "everyday life." They are an "image, fiction, a model, a metaphor," and above all a "means of expression." More than mere entertainment, the fights "enact" the "status relationships" of Balinese society. They bring alive for the participants and spectators all of the social differences among people-differences of jealousy, brutality and charm. On the surface, Balinese society seems sedate and placid, but below the surface are all kinds of feelings and tensions among people. In
effect, says Geertz, the cockfights are the Balinese peoples' reading of their own lives, the "story they tell themselves about themselves."

The Balinese cockfight may not seem like communication unless we compare it to a play, a movie, professional wrestling or a birthday party. Geertz joined the participants of many fights in order to find out what they "mean" to Balinese people and what they symbolize for Balinese culture. Geertz' cultural approach views the study and practice of communication more as an art than a science, more as dialogue than monologue, more like ritual than transmission, and more like anthropological field work than academic lab work or audience surveys. The cultural approach assumes that communication is subjective, interpretive and ritualistic, not mechanical and predictable. Instead of using mechanistic terms such as send and decode, cultural approaches describe communication as interpretation, meaning and context. In short, the cultural view sees the study of communication as an art for subjectively interpreting the meaning and significance of peoples’ shared cultural activities.

The cultural view of communication, for example, describes communication as sharing, participation, association, and fellowship, and even "the possession of a common faith." Communication is a participatory ritual in and through which we create, maintain and change culture. Rituals include the daily drama of reading the newspaper, the weekly patterns of worship, nightly TV viewing, attending courses, taking exams, dating, eating meals together, and participating in cockfights. We do not merely exchange messages; we literally co-create and share cultural rituals that define reality. For example, religious rituals such as Bible studies and worship shape our identities as Christians. Our faith becomes real to us as we share the faith’s rituals, from Christmas carols to Easter celebrations, from mealtime prayers to Sunday-afternoon dinner. Likewise, purchasing the right brand of jeans is part of a ritual of consumption that constructs as well as reflects personal identity. Not all cultural approaches to communication emphasize ritual, but they do focus on the ways that people dramatically co-create shared meanings.

If the transmission view of communication tries to dissect the process into measurable factors (e.g., demographics), the cultural view aims to capture the experience of communication as fully and realistically as possible. To put it differently, transmission scholars of communication seek to look at the process objectively from the outside, like a detached observer, whereas cultural scholars seek to view the process subjectively from the inside, like participant-observers. Geertz entered Balinese culture in order to understand the symbolic meaning of the cockfight for the Balinese people.

Benefits and Dangers of Cultural Maps
We believe that cultural maps of communication are more compatible overall with the Christian faith. Although there are many types of cultural approaches, they all share some strengths and weaknesses when analyzed from a Christian perspective.

First, cultural views generally capture more of the subjective, co-creative nature of communication. Even a film audience co-creates with the filmmaker the meaning of the movie as the audience views the film. Cultural views recognize the subjective nature of the meanings of symbols. The Balinese cockfight is a dynamic, exciting ritual charged with symbolic meaning created by the participants. As a result, cultural approaches are likely to be more open to scientifically inexplicable but meaningful communication, including the ways that God "speaks" grace into peoples’ lives. Even our faith is a creative dialogue with God and with each other.

Second, cultural theories of communication generally respect existing culture more fully than do transmission views. They focus more on interpreting culture than changing it. They also more generously accept different cultures and affirm cultural pluralism, since theoretically people could create any way of life. Therefore, cultural theories of communication are more likely to question the right of some groups to influence or even dominate other cultures. For instance, some scholars question the right of mass media to shape local, regional and especially traditional cultures that existed long before the media or modern cultures arrived in their communities. In short, cultural approaches to communication generally emphasize understanding more than influencing existing culture.

Third, cultural views seem to capture more of the way communication and community depend on each other. A cultural map of communication focuses on shared meaning and collective symbolic action. This book is largely based on a cultural approach to communication, partly because this view seems to fit better with God’s desire for us to live in communities of shalom. As the scriptures suggest, we are created in God’s image as cultural beings designed to live in fellowship and harmony. Consequently, we ought to carefully uphold a high view of the ability of people to fashion their own ways of life communally.

From a cultural perspective, communication enables us to keep the faith by sharing it with each other creatively in community. Down through the centuries after Christ’s resurrection, for instance, believers enjoyed and celebrated art inside and outside of church buildings. Art helped them to remember what they believed by expressing their faith in concrete, often visual forms. Paintings, sculptures, architecture, vestments and music helped believers to affirm the faith to themselves as well as to witness that faith to the wider community. Similarly, hymn books, liturgies, creeds and confessions, Christian literature and other printed materials keep alive particular Christian traditions. Technologies such as
the printing press certainly helped the church spread the community across space, but they also empowered the church to maintain its culture through time, from generation to generation. As Anabaptists know, one of the greatest witnesses of the church to the outside world is a strong, vibrant community life.

On the negative side, cultural views of communication easily slide into relativism. If communities merely create their own meaning, there is no objective truth. Cultural approaches tend to focus only on how particular cultures create and maintain their own meaning and ritual, not on what is ultimately true. They often assume that cultural preference is merely a matter of personal taste and group mores. Geertz hoped only to understand the Balinese cockfight, not to evaluate it using standards of peace or justice. We cannot agree uncritically with this kind of cultural relativism; however, we admit that human beings do co-create versions of reality. As we shall see in the next two chapters, the human Fall from grace distorts all of our understandings of reality. The scriptures make clear that humans cannot grasp all truth or create perfectly truthful communities of belief. As humans, we do fabricate reality. In other words, cultural theories may accurately capture how our misdirected symbols create distorted maps of reality—-- included distorted maps of communication.

In spite of the danger of relativism, cultural understandings of communication capture more of the image of God in humans than do transmission approaches. As God’s creatures, we do not just send and receive messages. Rather, we co-create meaningful culture, from cockfights to Easter pageants. We are often spontaneous, imaginative and unpredictable communicators. Moreover, our communication is relational and subjective. As a businessperson says about leadership, it is "more tribal than scientific, more weaving of relationships than an amassing of information...."

Conclusion

The transmission and cultural views of communication are premised on different understandings of human nature, research methodology, and culture. Transmission views emphasize human passivity, seek quantitative methods such as surveys and experiments, and conceive of culture as fairly static and organizational. Cultural views, on the other hand, emphasize human creativity, prefer qualitative methods such as participant observation, and assume that culture is highly dynamic and organic. The former loves the certainty of demographics and predictions, while the cultural views celebrate the interpretation of rituals. In the real world of communication, scholars combine and dilute transmission and cultural views of communication. Communication theory becomes both an art and a science. Scholars constantly revise theories in hopes of creating one that will work in particular situations. For instance, the rhetorician Kenneth Burke wrote much about identification as part of his larger theory of
communication. In this book, we borrow from his concept of identification without developing the fuller context of Burke’s work. Also, the ancient Greek rhetoricians such as Aristotle defined communication in terms of persuasion, but they never adopted the kind of mechanistic models advocated by some contemporary champions of a science of communication. In fact, ancient rhetoric has contributed substantially to cultural views of communication even though it emphasized persuasion. Many of the transmission models used in interpersonal, small-group and organizational communication are modified with various interpretive and subjective elements. In short, communication theorists mix and match their maps of reality in hopes of creating one that helps them either understand or control communication—or both.

In addition, there are no perfect theories. Sooner or later, all of them fail to explain particular communication. I favor cultural approaches, but I admit that they, too, break down under the heavy burden of complex cultural situations and God’s inexplicable intervention. Moreover, they can be self-delusional. How do we know that Geertz’s interpretation of the Balinese cockfight is accurate?

We all should pay attention to the views of communication that we use. After all, these views of communication are also views for communication. Our notions about communication are sometimes the maps that we use to guide ourselves through life. Scholars use maps of communication as a kind of self-help guide to the world around them. When Columbus landed in the New World, his maps told him he was in Asia. So he began naming North America as an Indian land for Spain. For decades, cartographers believed that Columbus had found the way to the East. God graciously gave us the capacity to co-create models of communication so that we might better understand God, others, the world and ourselves. But any map of communication can lead us astray if we fail to test it and modify it.

Finally, we should always remember that God’s grace transcends all of our theories of communication. From a Christian perspective, God is able to enter into culture, dialogue with individual believers, and even to direct history. We will never be able to explain all human communication or to completely control it. We merely taste the ultimate power of God’s Word.