

Managing Interpersonal Relations: Information Professionals and Communication in the Digital Age

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Valentina Comba
Inter-Library Center – C.I.B.
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
Bologna - Italy
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1. Outline

This contribution aims to focus on the change in interpersonal relations provoked by Internet-led changes in distant communication on one hand, and the availability of electronic/digital information for research and clinical practice on the other.

The statements (“*axioms*”) of the important book “*Pragmatics of Human Communication*¹” by P. Watzlawick and his colleagues offer a very useful insight into the understanding of our behaviour.

In the light of this theory some aspects of our day to day interpersonal relations are considered, both in terms of how we relate to the medical library users, and also considering the interpersonal communication of library staff.

In particular in this paper the following aspects are analysed:

- a. change in the workplace: the physical and the virtual library
- b. change in the relations with the users
- c. change in the relations with the staff in the library

In conclusion some suggestions are given to improve communication and the visibility of our professional work.

2. Introduction

Many important Authors² have recently studied the impact of new communication tools like cellular telephones, e-mail, chatlines etc. on the human behaviour, and the effects of groupware or collaborative software on the work in a defined environment.

These studies are beginning to find an application also in library environment³; the interest for the psychological aspects of interpersonal relations has increased since the advent of the digital library seems to threaten our profession, or almost some librarian roles (e.g. the reference librarians⁴).

Users’ behaviour in accessing electronic information, and by consequence their preferences and inclination to seek for librarians’ help and support is another very important issue. A new discipline,

1P. Watzlawick - J. H. Beavin - D. Jackson . *Pragmatics of Human Communications: a study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1967

2 I.Hutchby. *Conversation and technology: from the telephone to the Internet*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001

A. Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press, 1990.

A.Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity*, Cambridge, UK, Polity Press. 1991

3 M. de Miribel. Quelques outils pour gérer les conflits internes en bibliothèques. Proceedings of the 68th IFLA Council and General Conference, Glasgow, August 18-24, 2002 url

4 W. Y. Arms. Automated digital libraries: how effectively computers can be used for the skilled tasks of professional librarianship? D-lib July-August 2000 v.6 n.7/8 < <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/july00/arms/07arms.html>>

*social informatics*⁵ can offer decisive contribution to the user behaviour analysis in the digital libraries' context. A key paper written by Susan Leigh Star and Ann Peterson Bishop⁶ offers a comprehensive review on this subject and encourages librarians to understand the advantages of the digital libraries and how to relate to the services they provide.

As librarians, one of the most common reactions to the statements about the perfect digital library incorporating the professional (and even the affective !) help of the librarian as a human being and a professional worker, is "don't bother and continue to work on the library services like in the past". Alternatively, to start new jobs and special projects where the technological aspect is prevalent, thus, not involved in the daily human contact with users any longer.

The study I have conducted⁷ about the consequences on our relations of a deeper view on what are the *Pragmatics of Human Communication*' axioms, and also a recent article written by a medical librarian about our work as information mediators⁸, lead to some suggestions about how to develop a more fruitful approach in the present environment.

3. What is communication ?

During an interview about his work, Paul Watzlawick said:

*"Il est évident que s'il n'y a personne autour de vous, vous allez vous retrouver avec la vieille question: "L'arbre qui tombe dans la forêt fait-il du bruit s'il n'y a personne pour l'entendre ?". Pour qu'il y ait communication, il faut la présence d'au moins un autre personne."*⁹

[It is clear that if there nobody nearby you, you have to answer the old question: " Is the tree falling down in the forest making noise, if there isn't anybody to listen to it ?" To communicate at least two persons are needed]

In the first chapter of his fundamental book he says that there are three different sectors or levels of the study on communication: the syntax, the semantics and the pragmatics. Syntax is dealing with the coding and the physical transmission (channels, redundancy, noise, etc.), semantics is dealing with meanings of words and sentences and pragmatics has to do with the behaviour, or the psychology of communication. Of course all these aspects are mixed, but the theory that Watzlawick and his colleagues have designed deals more with the behaviour, that is the study of the communication as an interactive process.

As a starting point for the study, we have to understand the *axioms* that Watzlawick has formulate:

First Axiom: **One cannot not communicate**

Second Axiom: **Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically**

Third Axiom: **Communication=content + relationship**

Fourth Axiom: **Punctuation of the communication sequence**

Fifth Axiom: **All communication may be either complementary or symmetrical**

There is also a sixth remark, which is crucial to understand some phenomena, that the **context** (in which communication is performed) is fundamental.

These statements have important consequences on the analysis and understanding of the roots for conflicts and psychological problems.

5 R.Kling , *What is social informatics and why does it matter?* , D-Lib Magazine, 5 (1999), 1,p.1-27, <<http://www.dlib.org/dlib/january99/kling/01kling.html>>.

6 A.P.Bishop, S.L.Star, *Social informatics of digital libraries use and infrastructure*, Annual review of information science and technology, 31 (1996), p.301-401.

7 V.Comba. *Comunicare nell'era digitale*. Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 2000

8 L.Zick. The work of information mediators: a comparison of librarians and intelligent software agents. *First Monday*, v.5.n.5. May 2000.< http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue5_5/zick/index.html>

9 In:*La nouvelle communication*, Textes [G.Bateson - R Birdwhistell - E.Goffman - E.T.Hall - D.Jackson - A. Scheflen - S.Sigman - P.Watzlawick], recuillis et présentés par Yves Winkin, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1981

In this paper I shall only consider some features of the theory, in order to clarify why distant is different to face-to-face communication.

The first three axioms and the sixth consideration explain that we, as human beings, communicate both with some codified verbal expressions (digital communication or “numerique” as it is translated in French) and with the so-called non-verbal expressions (body language, face expression, tone of the voice, eye movement, etc.) or analogical communication. The point is that analogical communication qualifies the digital communication and makes immediate understanding without any possible ambiguity of the message possible. The **context** is the scene where the communication performs: the context makes it possible to understand clearly if communication is congruous or incongruous, that is if the message is or is not in harmony with the surrounding features.

What happens when we communicate without the so called non verbal cues, for instance by e-mail, or sending a SMS on a mobile phone, or through a chatline ? And what happens when the context is totally unknown, or largely presumed ?

Most of the analogical communication must be conveyed by syntax, punctuation, spaces, the smileys (in e-mails) and the words we are using. It should be noted that in general it is becoming easier and easier to express feelings and emotions with the written words in a e-mail context. However, even if these elements were carefully monitored – which rarely happens – there may be ambiguity, or misunderstanding. In fact, most of the conversations taking place on chatlines take advantage of these conditions (of ambiguity) in order to create relations between hidden or false identities.

What makes the messages clear and probably unambiguous is the **context, and the previous acquaintance with the person sending the message.**

This is the reason why the *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (and many contributions of the important anthropologist Gregory Bateson who traced the path for the following Watzlawick theories) are so useful to understand what it is changing with distant communication and what can we do to make it more effective.

4. Communication in the physical and virtual library

As we know, users are coming less and less to the physical library (especially the medical library users, who have the advantage to access to electronic and digital information more than a history scholar or a researcher on ancient books, or a mathematician...) and usually browse, read and use parts of documents in pdf or html from their personal computers, palm computers or laptops. The library is therefore remote, and provides services with online catalogs, making the access to licensed journals and databases possible, organizing unique interfaces for the hybrid library.

But these services only allow users to work individually (and the librarian may evaluate the usage patterns through the server logs and the publishers usage figures). There are no spaces of collaborative work between the users of the library inside the library virtual space (i.e. the catalog) or between the librarian and the users. Yet, there is an evidence about the fact that users need to access most information directly without being obliged to go to the physical library, or make time consuming document delivery requests¹⁰.

This is the reason why, developing the digital libraries services it is important to think to some meetings points, managed by librarians, like forums, and apply new forms of collaboration in the virtual space¹¹.

10 D.Marmion. Listening to our users. Editorial. Information Technology and Libraries vol.21, n.2 June 2002

http://www.lita.org/ital/2102_editorial.html

“So many Internet-based transactions culminate with the user having possession of that which was sought. Not so in the library online catalog. Most OPAC-based transactions culminate with the user then having to go to the library and find that which was sought. We are seeing evidence that this is something users will actively avoid”.

11 S.G.Cohen, D.Mankin. Collaboration in the Virtual Organization. Trends in Organization Behavior v. 6, chapter 7, p.105-120.

Some Authors¹² have also proposed software for collaborative browsing, setting a space where librarians and users can cooperate for more effective search.

5. Communication between librarians and users

As previously said, there are less and less effective users of the library services that are entering the physical library spaces. How is it possible to acquire electronic collections, develop good distant services, discuss the performances without a contact ?

The first suggestion is always to recognize that “the users” are not an indistinct and vague mass of persons, but there are groups and individual users who have different needs and use services in different way (or maybe they do not even know about the existence of the library and the librarians! They just use “what is on the Internet”). For each of these groups, or even for each single person there should be a special approach to finalize the actions and the services.

The librarians may probably know what some users do (as said, through the server log, the web statistics and so on) but they lack of hints about the users satisfaction¹³.

The marketing principles would help the librarians to recognize the different groups and target their action. But the principles of the *Pragmatics of Human Communication* will help them understand when the group may be approached by e-mail (with some requests, with a questionnaire, etc.) or a face-to-face meeting is necessary (and which level of meeting).

If the librarians’ goal is to receive a qualitative feedback than rather a quantitative evaluation about library acquisitions and services, it is very useful to use the face-to-face contact, or a telephone interview, which can give much more cues in less time than a long questionnaire, and give the user the opportunity to express his or her views directly to the librarian. But there are certain opinions which would be expressed more freely in an anonymous context than in person: in these cases a questionnaire is the most appropriate way to contact users.

An example can be offered with the special group of the stakeholders: they may decide on the library budget, sometimes on the staff but they may be in position in which they very seldom use the library services (i.e. a library committee composed by professors who do not need any more to publish large quantities of articles to proceed in their career). So they do not know exactly what the library is doing but they have decide about the budget. This is a complex situation where a mixture of levels of communication is needed: and it is more successful to provide not only figures on library services usage, but also the personal feedback of some important users (in order to give an overall impression that the library cares about the users and about making them satisfied).

In this example the librarian knows the user, and is working in a defined context: these conditions help to tackle the difficult goal of being in touch and communicate positively.

How can one deal with the individual user in a digital environment ?

This question has different answers and many solutions, but one that is proving to be quite effective is to provide live digital reference as a personalized service. A recent review of G.C.Chowdury¹⁴ analyses the issue from different points of view, including the digital libraries engineers’ point of view aiming at incorporating knowledge bases of answered questions in the services provided.

The current state of digital reference services suggests that the human reference librarian is still crucial to provide access to both printed and digital relevant sources. He or she may even make use of intelligent agents or knowbots in some cases, but Watzlawick can remember us how much time can be saved and wrong answers avoided if the message is for a **known person in a defined context**. In addition, there is already some literature¹⁵ about the advantage of also using a webcam in the

12 M.B.Twidale, D.M.Nichols, *Browsing is a collaborative process*,

<<http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/computing/research/cseg/projects/ariadne/docs/bcp.html>>

13 An interesting project on this subject has been cited by Rick Luce al the Ticer Spring School, last March 2002.

Active Recommendations Systems for libraries without walls: <<http://www.c3.lanl.gov/~rocha/lww/>>

14 G.G.Chowdhury. Digital libraries and reference services: present and future. *Journal of Documentation*, v.58,n.3, 2002, p.258-283.

15 S.Lessick, K.Kjaer, S.Clancy. Interactive Reference Service (IRS) at UC Irvine: expanding reference service beyond the reference desk. ACRL, 1997 <<http://www.ala.org/acrl/paperhtm/a10.html>>

interaction between the distant reference librarian and the user: this is again the demonstration that analogical communication helps the dialog and gives the opportunity of a more complete and quicker understanding of questions and answers.

6. Communication among the library staff

The electronic mail and the exchange of gossips with some “pathological” patterns (i.e. excluding the person who is criticized from the communication) can cause serious problems and provoke conflicts. Some examples have been made in an interesting paper¹⁶ just delivered at the IFLA Conference in Glasgow.

Sometimes librarians and their bosses do not realize what is the cause of the conflict because they are involved deeply in the communication sequence (fourth axiom !) and therefore they all need an external help, like an husband and a wife who can't stop arguing.

A true leader in the organization is able to “listen” to his or her staff problematic situation and decide to ask help or find out a solution which changes the context where the problem is risen.

In the case of a new project which involves changes in the library and information service, communication is a key issue for the manager and the staff¹⁷

7. Conclusions

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from an in depth study and application of the *Pragmatics*' axioms.

In general, we can observe that the communication is taking place when the an interactive relation occurs. Therefore any new approach or service is useful if based on interaction.

Medical counseling is also an approach which is very much based on the Watzlawick theory and many anthropological studies.

There is a side reflection that I consider very valuable for the changing roles of librarians in the digital era: we should listen and learn more from experts outside the libraries world. We shall discover how much librarians are sometimes self-centred and self-opinionated: we march unknowingly toward the deeper ravine !

Some medical doctors openly acknowledge the importance of social psychology topics normally studied in non-clinical contexts, as it is stated by the Editor of the “Patient Education and Counseling”¹⁸.

We should try to develop substantially our professional training in some relational roles in the library services, mainly for distant users. The interactive approach promises to reveal and show our hidden profession¹⁹ and our capability to support users research, from the search and the publication of medical evidence to the use the scientific knowledge for the patients' health.

16 deMiribel cit.

17 C.Gallacher. Managing change in libraries and information services. London: Aslib, 1999.

18 J.A.Hall. A social psychology of health care interactions. Editorial. Patient education and Counseling v.40 2000, p.3

19 S.A.Nardi, Y.Engeström. a Web on the Wind: the structure of invisible work. Introduction. A special Issue of Computer-Supported Cooperative Work. V.8,n.1-2 1999.< <http://www.darrouzet-nardi.net/bonnie/InvisibleW.html>>

“Erllich and Cash point to another endangered class: those who “find, filter, sort and interpret existing information,” including journalists, reviewers, librarians, editors and customer support representatives. They note that the critical invisibility here is that the user's task is conceptualized as simply connecting with raw information, when what users actually often need is a way to make sense of the information. Using data from their extensive studies of librarians and customer support representatives, they document the valuable services provided by human intermediaries that are not made unnecessary by direct end-user access. Ehrlich and Cash suggest ways to fruitfully bring together technology and people to better serve human needs, rather than eliminating humans from the equation.”

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