

A matter of position

by **David Sless**

Editor's note:

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Preamble

This paper is about position: my position and yours. What is our position as intellectuals and researchers in relation to the developments and applications in communication: the objects we study, the systems we try to understand and criticise, and our teaching programs?

I want to suggest to you that position is a central concept in our field of communication. The concept of position provides us with the best hope of integrating our diverse interests and methods into a unified point of view from which to develop the future of our subject.

In my book *In Search of Semiotics* I developed a formal account of what I have called the logic of positions—a set of axioms that describe our relationship to our communicative environment, which may be likened to a landscape: what we see

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depends on where we are standing, on our position. As we shift our position new things become visible and some things are occluded from view.

In this paper I will apply the logic of positions to three areas of activity: survey research, organisational communication, and cultural studies. In each case new insights and questions are revealed which are distinctly the concern of an emergent independent discipline of communication.

A paradoxical position

I must confess at the outset that I find my own position strange, paradoxical, and even ironic. I am reminded of Barthes' remark in the preface to *Mythologies* where he says:

What I claim is to live to the full the contradictions of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth. (Barthes, pp . 11-12)

In the past I have commented, sometimes acerbically, on the absence of any real subject of communication. I have always seen myself as a deflator of pretentious bubbles and a debunker of false prophets; a self-appointed, and at times mischievous Socratic inquisitor. It has always seemed to me that our credibility has hung by a thread and I have never hesitated to pull at it to see how strong it was.

I was therefore extremely surprised, in view of my scepticism, when I was asked to become President of this Association; professional dissidents and outsiders don't usually get invited to be leaders, and when they do, there is usually a local version of the CIA or mafia to ensure they don't get in. But the forces of darkness either failed, did not try, or don't really

exist, and so I find myself today in a peculiar position: a sceptical outsider, more adept at demolition than construction, placed in the position of offering guidance on the future foundations of our subject.

And indeed, until recently, it seemed to me odd that I should be giving a Presidential address. How could I talk about foundations when I was surrounded by dust and rubble? But, gradually over the last three years, through my experience with the establishment of the Communication Research Institute of Australia (CRIA), I have changed my outlook. Emerging from our work at the Institute is a distinctive point of view. I would put it no stronger than that at this stage, though I will argue in this paper that it is a point of view which has the potential to provide communication with the theoretical coherence that has eluded it to now.

Let me begin by defending my scepticism. For although I have been a minority voice, I have not been alone. Our field of communication has been described by others as a non-subject: an area of interest with no distinctive theory, discipline or methods of its own. For example, Henry Mayer, in his usual forthright manner, began a paper on Political Communication by asserting that:

There cannot be a state-of-the-art paper on political communication. There is nothing even close to a widely agreed on field with boundaries which may be surveyed. (Mayer 1985: p.137)

This view of one aspect of the field is echoed throughout. In a recent paper in the US journal *Communication Research*, John Peters argues that communication research suffers from intellectual poverty (Peters 1986). Commenting on

departments of communication in universities and colleges he says:

[Communication] has come to be administratively, not conceptually defined. Each department, school, or university creates the field anew in its own image. Theory fails as a principle of definition, as does the attempt to define communication as a distinct subject matter. (Peters, 1986: p.528)

Despite the appalling habit of US academics to include, by default, the rest of the world in their pronouncements, this particular observation of USA institutions may well be relevant to us. Our best recent course plans are distinguished, not by coherence of subject matter, method or theory, but rather by a broad minded and well informed eclecticism (Irwin, Galvin and Nightingale 1986).

Peters rightly draws attention to the lack of any concern in recent debates for the central problem of the existence of communication as a field of research. Nowhere is this absence more obvious than in the factional debates displayed in a recent issue of the *Journal of Communication* (Vol. 33, Summer 1983) with the portentous title of *Ferment in the Field*. Peters astutely observes:

No stone remains unturned in those pages save the existence of the field itself, which seems to enjoy a curious immunity to critical reflection..... Like all other debates so far, this one fails to provide any coherent argument for communication's existence as a self-supporting field. (ibid p. 529)

The institutional reasons for such silence were succinctly summarised by Henry Mayer in his overview of political communication:

If one gives a course and necessarily, if one struggles to get one's share of resources, the structure of universities and CAE's compels a fake consensus-by-fiat. One must cut off almost completely key issues. Any one of these seriously pursued must lead to basic problems.... Since

there is little agreement on any of them one won't be able to start. (Mayer 1985 p.137)

For many years I have agreed with this sceptical view. None the less, despite my scepticism, I have suspected that there is something distinctive about communicative phenomena, something which was not reducible to any other subject, be it anthropology, sociology, psychology, politics or linguistics.

My suspicion has turned into a conviction. The fundamental and applied research that we have conducted at CRIA has led me to see communication as a distinctive phenomenon which cannot be subsumed under any other discipline, leading us to new questions and new research methods.

My evolving sense of position

I began my own research in communication while working in an art school. I was influenced by the seminal work of Gombrich on pictorial perception (Gombrich 1960) and by Abercrombie's important observations and insights about learning to read images (Abercrombie 1960). They both demonstrated that the perception of pictures was a complex interaction of on the one hand, prior expectations and knowledge—what they called schemata after Kant—and on the other hand, the information present in the picture. Gombrich, in particular, drew attention to the central role of the beholder's share—what Roscharch had called projection, when describing the way in which people looked at ink blots and 'projected' onto them their own preconceptions and expectations. Abercrombie's research and that of others in pictorial perception had demonstrated that under certain quite ordinary

conditions dramatic and remarkable changes can occur in our reading of pictures. For example, the illustration in the figure will probably not make sense to all of you.

Figure 1



There will be some few among you who will recognise it spontaneously, though those of you who have read my book *Learning and Visual Communication* will have no difficulty in reading it because you will have seen this demonstration before. However, for many of you who have not had the fortunate experience of reading my book, this image will not make sense. But once I show you how to read it by giving you a schema to follow, you will have no difficulty.

[Go to schema](#)

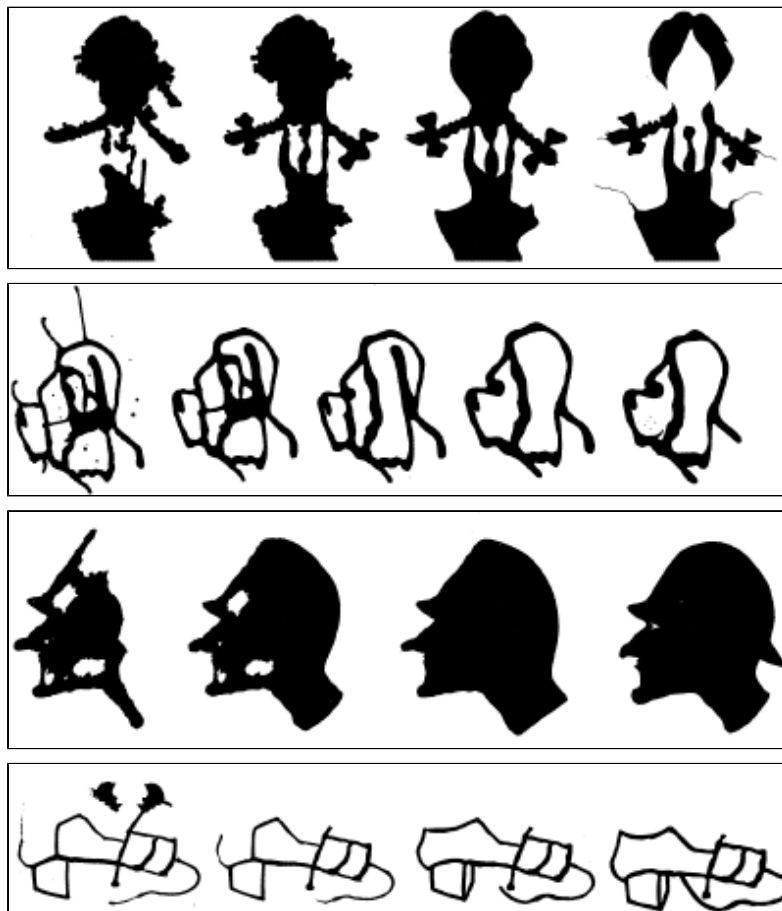
You can now project this schema onto the original image and a curious and profoundly important change occurs. Once you have made sense of it—that is once you have been given a schema with which to interpret it—you cannot go back to your former ignorance or innocence; once you have

tasted of the tree of the knowledge there is no return. You can of course remember your state of grace, as it were, but you cannot undo the structuring which your reading process has undergone. Moreover, the structuring appears to take place in the picture itself, even though we know that the change has in fact been in our reading and not in the picture. Our experience is as if the picture has changed; we cannot distinguish between our reading of the picture and the picture itself. The demonstration of this process was the first insight I had into a general principle: namely that the image and its reading, or more generally the text and reader, were one unit, indivisible from each other as units of analysis. The full theoretical significance of this insight became apparent when I began, at a later date, to ask questions about the units of analysis in media studies (Sless 1978). At the time, when I first became aware of this phenomenon, my interests were more empirical.

I wanted to know what part this process played in the creation of pictures and their subsequent reading. In a series of experiments which I conducted with art students, I discovered that it played a major role (Sless 1975 and 1979). The experiments I performed were very simple. I asked students to look at an ink blot and make a prediction about how someone else would see the blot. I then took the blot to another group of students and asked them what they saw. In every case there were large discrepancies between the predictions and the actual readings. I then asked the original students to modify the image just sufficiently so that readers would see it in accordance with the original predictions they had made and again tested the modified blots on a second group of students. In all

cases it took the students at least three cycles of modification and subsequent testing before they achieved optimal results. Most of the students found it increasingly difficult to believe the persistent variability of readings after the second modification. The reading which the design students projected on the blots made it progressively harder, and eventually impossible, for them to see the blot from anybody else's point of view. Their position and their projections determined their reading.

Figure 3: students' project in image design and modification (from Sless 1975 and 1979)



This simple experiment and its results made me sceptical and curious about attempts to provide generalised readings of images or attempts to predict the outcome of particular communicative acts.

To what extent could this phenomenon be generalised to professionals? Would professional designers be more successful at making predictions than students? I was particularly interested in the claim made by some designers that visual communication constituted an international language which transcended cultural boundaries. I continued my research with a number of studies of images produced by professional designers, focusing on public information symbols, a relatively simple set of images with a precise specified function. My research, and that of others working in the field, showed repeatedly that the best efforts of designers—despite the sometimes heavy assertive rhetoric of professional competence—produced results which were no better in most instances than the results my students had achieved after their first attempts at modification (Cairney and Sless 1982).

How were other communication professionals coping with this problem, if indeed it was a problem? Perhaps the history of graphic design training in the early part of our century, full of the rhetoric of modernism and its attendant globalism, had led to an exaggerated localised view of so-called professional communicators' power—a view that might be absent in other fields of communication, either because communicators in other fields were more successful or because they had more modest expectations of success. Did other communicators know more about their audiences, were they more able to communicate effectively? After looking at the research on professional communicators in the mass media, education and a host of other areas I came to the conclusion that:

It would be true to say of most professional communicators that they are ignorant of their audience

and have neither the skills nor the inclination to dispel that ignorance. ...[They] are likely to be partially successful some of the time. What lies tantalisingly out of reach is knowing when, how and with whom. (Sless 1981 p. 49)

I also discovered that in most communication professions there are strong belief structures which maintain the myth of effective communication. If these generalisations are true of the professionals, what about the rest of us? How successful are we in interpersonal relations? The field of interpersonal communication, which Robyn Penman has introduced to me, is similarly filled with uncertainty and failure, and here too, despite the overwhelming evidence, people continue to display extraordinary confidence in their ability to be successful communicators and are similarly unable to put themselves in the other person's position.

My work in this area was progressing (if the discovery of failure may be described as progress) alongside the recent fashionable developments in structuralist semiology.

While I was preoccupied with the complexities of looking at pictures, I read Judith Williams methodological assertion that in her study of pictorial advertisements she was:

.... simply analysing what can be *seen* in advertisements (Williamson 1978, p.11) (my italics)

While I was struggling with the variability of interpretation and the apparent lack of control that professional communicators exerted over their audience, I read Brunsdon and Morley's confident judgement that a certain formal structure within the television discourse:

.... renders the audience rationally impotent (Brunsdon and Morley 1978, p.23)

I began to wonder less about audiences and professional communicators and more about communication researchers. If professional communicators failed to predict the outcome of their own actions and languished in a state of 'autistic activity and belief' (Burns 1969), what was the privileged position which researchers occupied that enabled them to transcend such limitations? If we are unable in our normal interpersonal relations to anticipate the consequences of our actions on others, how can we as researchers anticipate the reactions of audiences to texts which are only being read as part of a research program?

I started to analyse the way in which researchers wrote about the objects they were studying. In particular, I was interested in the claim made by structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers that they were studying the structure of texts independently of their production or reading. If correct, then semiological analyses, like the ones I have quoted above, could bypass the problems of anticipating readings and simply concentrate on the structure of texts. But, on careful inspection, I discovered that the claim that they were studying the structure of texts independently of their production or reading was simply false (Sless 1983). Structural analyses are always populated by projected readers and authors. Far from being independent of production or reading, the whole fabric of structural analysis is in fact made out of the ghostly presence of projected readers and authors. I can demonstrate the point easily by reference to a text with which many of you will be familiar: Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. In the opening sentence to his essay on newspaper coverage of a royal cruise he says:

Ever since the Coronation, the French had been pining for fresh news about royal activities. (Barthes 1972, p. 32)

The image of the French wistfully flicking the pages of the press looking for any account of royal deeds is projected onto all that follows. This is not an isolated case. All the essays in *Mythologies* are similarly populated by these Barthesian projections. Even the more methodologically self-conscious writers, of both structuralist and post-structuralist persuasions, such as Foucault, Derrida or Baudrillard, still populate their analyses with projected readers and authors. In fact, I could not find a single analysis of any text which did not contain both implicit and frequently explicit references to either projected authors or readers. Moreover, my study suggested that the structure of a text was not determined by signifiers and signifieds, arranged in syntagmatic and paradigmatic chains, but was instead determined by the researchers' projections of readers and authors onto the text in a way similar to, though more subtle than, the example of the picture of the cow with which I began. The effect of their projections are, however, the same. Researchers, like any other readers, cannot shrug off the projections they have created. And, therefore, they cannot see the text from another reader's point of view. Researchers are no less vulnerable to this effect than anyone else. There are no methodologies available to the researchers which enable them to succeed where everyone else has failed.

This limitation, far from being a handicap, as many might see it, is one of the distinctive qualities of our relationship to communicative phenomena. We can acknowledge, like physicists since the invention of quantum mechanics, that we are participants within the processes we study—though unlike the physicists,

who can make accurate predictions with quantum mechanics, we can make no predictions whatever (Sless 1986 pp. 91-97).

There is, of course, nothing new in the idea that we are participants. The disciplines that many of us come from, such as sociology, psychology, history, anthropology and education, have for a long time now articulated their own concerns about the relationship between researcher and subject matter, and for many years we have all paid lip service to problems of subjectivity, culture, bias and the like. A kind of sloppy relativism has pervaded our thinking which in its worst form argues that all readings are equally valid. Just because our capacity to understand other people's reading of texts is limited by our position does not mean to say that we need to slip into the abyss of relativism or into the fashionable Parisian nihilism.

There is an important difference between relativism and relativity. In the former, to which many have succumbed, there is a logical fallacy: if all things can be said to be relative, so by definition must be the statement I just made: namely, that all things are relative. Nothing can ever be said which will lift us out of the quagmire of our own idiosyncracies. On the other hand with relativity we can search for underlying framework within which we act. We may not be able to transcend the position we find ourselves in but that should not prevent us from understanding why. I began in *Learning and Visual Communication* to articulate the logic of our participation in the process of communication. I devoted my book, *In Search of Semiotics*, to a detailed mapping of this logic, which I have called the logic of positions, and it is from this that I derive

the conviction that we have a distinctive communication point of view.

The logic of positions is a set of axioms that describes our relationship as readers, authors and researchers to individual texts and which provides the basis for mapping out our relations to our communicative environment. In talking about 'our relations' I would like continually to emphasise that I am talking about us as researchers as well as those on whom we may conduct our research. In my book I have likened our communicative environment to a landscape: what we see depends on where we are standing—on our position. As we shift our position new things become visible and some things are occluded from view. However, the analogy with a landscape is limited and I introduce it here simply to give a flavour of a more complex argument.

The essence of the logic of positions as it relates to reading may be summarised as follows:

- ▶ Any reading of a text involves the reader in projecting another entity onto the text. In its simplest and most obvious form this other entity might be a projected author.
- ▶ A reader may project another reader onto the text.
- ▶ A reader who tries to stand back from the text and 'observe' it creates a special kind of projected reader which I have called a deputy reader.

There are a number of additional logical dependencies which prescribe our relationship to texts which I shall not detail here. The most important general propositions I would like to draw attention to here are, firstly, that the projections in

our reading and writing of texts are inevitable and ubiquitous; and secondly, that our position as readers or authors always occlude from view portions of the communication landscape. There is no bird's eye view from which to see the process of communication. We are always already embedded in the process.

It is not my intention in this paper to give an account of the general theory of communication and semiotics which underlies the logic of positions. There is a detailed account of the theory in my book *In Search of Semiotics*.

In this paper I want to show how the logic of positions can be applied to three areas of activity: survey research, organisational communication, and cultural studies. In each case new insights and questions are revealed which are distinctly the concern of an emergent independent discipline of communication.

Survey Research

Much of what passes for research about communication, particularly in the sociology of mass media, uses surveys. With hindsight it seems surprising that researchers, who have discovered such variability and diversity in human communication by using surveys, have accepted the validity and legitimacy of survey research; it is somehow as if asking a question with a clipboard in one hand and a pencil in the other were not itself a process of communication and was free of the normal variability and diversity associated with other communication processes.

From an empiricist scientific point of view, the survey

interview is a particular method of data collection—a scientific instrument with specific benefits and limitations. From a communication point of view, however, the survey interview is a particular type of communication. In the former view the survey is judged against the standards of scientific method; in the later it is judged as a dynamic relation with similar or different properties to other kinds of communicative processes.

The variability, which is accepted as normal in all communication processes, is treated as an aberration—a lack of rigour—in survey research. A recently published account by Belson—one of the champions of survey methodology—shows that the variability is there if one looks for it (Belson 1986).

Belson discovers two major sources of variability: sometimes interviewers change the wording of the questions; sometimes respondents interpret the questions in a way not intended by their designers. From a communication point of view, neither of these findings is in any way surprising; all that is surprising is that they tend to be systematically ignored by those who undertake surveys and those who use the results from surveys. Belson discovered that interviewers change the wording of questions by tape recording actual interviewers at work; even though they know they are being recorded they change the wording—so what might they do when there are no tape recorders present? He discovered that respondents interpret questions widely by using intensive interviews as a follow-up to normal interviews; it should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with research on interpersonal communication that answers given in surveys do not always match answers given in intensive interviews—

the dynamics of these two communication processes are radically different.

If we apply the logic of positions to the interview situation the variability can be seen in a totally different light. The information given by an interviewee will in part be a function of how they think the information will be used. For example, if people thought the interviewer was reporting to a government department about their personal circumstances, would they always be totally truthful? If they thought the organisation collecting information stood to make a lot of money from what they were told, and intended to give nothing in return, would they be so open? In other words, the interviewee's projections of the organisation collecting information will determine in part what they say because the texts they produce—that is their answers—are texts which the interviewer has to read.

The same logic applies to the interviewers. How they read the text provided by the interviewees will in part be determined by how they thought they had asked the questions and what value they attached to the answers. However, for the interviewers there is a further dimension; they have to report back to a survey leader; in other words they have to create a further text. What they report, how they complete the schedule of questions, how they respond in the debriefing will depend on their projection of the survey leader. Is the leader an employer, an academic supervisor, or even themselves? What kind of quality control measures will the leader be able to use in order to check the quality of specific interviews? The answers given to each of these questions will create projections which the

interviewers will use to guide their completion of the questionnaire—the text they are producing.

If we now look at the survey leader we can see a further set of projections about the interviewers, the respondents, and, most importantly, the reader of the survey report, all of which play a part in the shaping of another text—the survey report itself.

Finally, and this is the position most of us find ourselves in, there is the reader of the report. From this position, layers of projections are convoluted one into the other; we project an author of the report, through which we project the survey interviewers, through which we project the respondents. At least three layers of projections are compressed into the the reading of the one text. Given that at every layer within the convolutions there are different projections, how confident could we be in our judgements about the text we read? At stake here is a fundamental philosophical and practical methodological issue about research in communication which requires a digression in order to avoid any misunderstanding.

We need to distinguish between a central issue in the philosophy of language and the pragmatics of communication research. The fact that there are many potential interpretations of one text does not mean there are no commonly shared meanings. Common meanings must be possible, otherwise any kind of language is itself impossible. There should be no need to recapitulate, among people at this conference, basic philosophical arguments about private versus public languages.

However, for pragmatic reasons, we need to take a sceptical view of the public nature of languages. The

practical problem with sharing, as opposed to the philosophical problem, is that in any particular instance, from a particular position, it is very hard to decide what exactly is being shared. While we can accept that shared meanings are at the basis of language, we cannot assume, in any particular instance of use, that shared meanings are in fact being used. The evidence we have from many areas of communication, including evidence from the behaviour of communication researchers, is that variability in the interpretation of texts occurs as a normal part of communication processes. The key to understanding this difficulty lies in our recognition of the logic of positions. A common language can only be seen from a position which can look down on many instances of use and observe the commonality. Unfortunately, as the logic of positions demonstrates, none of us occupies such a position; we are all already participants and inside the process, and our participation at a particular position subtly refracts and changes our immediate environment. In practice our readings of texts require only a belief in a public language. And an analysis of communication using the logic of positions demonstrates that a belief in shared meanings, through projection, is sufficient for communication processes to proceed. My demonstration of projection, with the cow, at the beginning of this paper was not an isolated phenomenon, but a constant presence in all our communicative activity.

When we come to interpret the results of surveys by reading the survey reports, we need to be extremely cautious. But we should not assume that commonly agreed ways of interpreting survey results are impossible. We can ask two questions, using the logic of positions, in order to come closer to an answer.

Firstly, we should ask how many texts there are between ourselves and the respondents to the survey; secondly, we should look more closely at the projections which are used. For example, respondents to surveys by government agencies do not always clearly distinguish between different government departments; taxation, trade, industry, statistics may be seen simply as different names for the same bureaucracy. They project onto the survey questionnaire an undifferentiated sense of 'government'. If, in such surveys they are asked questions about financial matters by a department other than taxation, they may perceive no difference between the collecting body and taxation, and their response will be guided by appropriate projections which will shape their reading of the questionnaire and the answers they give.

There is one further point that is worth mentioning. From the point of view of social science, the survey is a research instrument. It may be that, in some as yet to be established way, it has utility in communication research. From a communication point of view, the survey is not so much a method of research, it is more an interesting object for us to conduct research on and in. Our program of research at the Institute reflects this emphasis. We see the social survey interview as one relation among a group that we are currently investigating. Robyn Penman's research on the relation between barristers and witnesses is one strand of this. My own work on forms is another.

Organisational Communication

The CRIA spends a great deal of time advising large organisations about their communication problems,

and conducting research on the flow of information in, out, and through corporate structures. Every day I am confronted with opportunities to test theory and develop methods of research, and I must confess that I find the organisational communication literature barren, and the methods of research it uses, arid. I have not found a single case where I could confidently apply techniques such as network analysis or communication audits; these specialist survey techniques are not only subject to the same general problems as other survey techniques but they have the added problem that they are used within the workplace—a communication environment which is highly charged with economic relations, power struggles and related forces. There is something even more obviously absurd about asking anyone in that context to provide neutral information. Moreover, no one, either inside or outside an organisation, has a vantage point from which it is possible to observe neutrally the organisation's functioning. Certainly my position as an external advisor or researcher is never that of a neutral observer; my relation with any organisation is fixed even before I get a phone call or letter asking me for advice or commissioning me to undertake research. From the start I am enmeshed in the politics of the organisation—potentially a pawn in somebody else's game, a feature on their landscape. My main analytic tool in such circumstances is the logic of positions.

As many of you know, I have been involved in a great deal of research in forms design. The Rayner Report—a UK Government Review of administrative forms published in 1982—catalysed the present interest in forms in both the UK and Australia. Rayner found that:

.... the most common cause of bad forms is that no one [in government] looks at them from the point of view of the recipient or thinks what will happen if they are misunderstood. (Rayner 1982 p.8)

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the importance of position. Certainly our research shows over and over again that administrators fail to put themselves in the position of the people who have to use the forms. However, identifying the reason does not automatically lead to a solution, since it is by no means obvious how you do put yourself in somebody else's position. If you remember my example of the cow, you will understand that it is actually impossible to 'look at the form from the point of view of the recipient'—innocence can never be recaptured.

Seeing a text from the point of view of another reader is not only a problem central to form design but to many practical concerns in communication, and the solutions which we have developed for form designers have greater generality and application. We have discovered the same reasons for poor form design in all administrative bodies in both the private and public sectors, and this leads to a more fundamental question about the nature of the organisations themselves. What is it in the make up of large organisations which leads to this ubiquitous phenomenon? The logic of positions has enabled us to discover the multiple projections between bureaucrat and citizen which lead to the reasons for poor form design. Each organisation seems to create a unique pattern of projections, and the projections themselves can vary widely both in their nature and stability. Equally the projections of the organisations' publics show great diversity. The key points of leverage in this work are the projections. Creating change involves changing projections. Those of you

familiar with Foucault's notion of the subject in discourse will understand that this is no simple change but one with far reaching consequences.

Once again, the methods of research and the findings of this work are distinctively within the domain of communication at the heart of which is the concept of position.

Cultural Studies

Finally, I would like to turn to the problematic field of cultural studies which has dominated much of our mixed bag of concerns over the last few years. I recently read an essay by Baudrillard—another French iconoclast who writes very excitable and highly mannered prose which every now and then vaguely glances off some issue related to communication. In his standard apocalyptic style he tells us that:

The immense majority of present day photographic, cinematic and television images are thought to bear witness to the world with a naive resemblance and a touching fidelity. We have spontaneous confidence in their realism. We are wrong. (Baudrillard 1984 p.14)

Here is a perfect example of the problem of position. Are the 'We' who have the spontaneous confidence the same as the 'We' who are wrong? Has Baudrillard by some miracle of linguistic contortion moved in the space of a sentence from a position inside the discourse to one outside it? Is it possible for us to passionately assert one thing and then equally passionately assert its contrary? I might also ask how we can reconcile this vehemently assertive passage with Baudrillard's equally passionate belief that meanings defy clear specification (except presumably in Baudrillard's work or when Baudrillard is telling us how we think and whether we are right

or wrong).

One of the unfortunate tendencies in contemporary cultural studies is for those engaged in it to describe everyone's position except their own. I have in a previous paper (Sless 1983) and in *In Search of Semiotics* questioned the kinds of categories of readers which have been projected onto texts. In particular I used Stuart Hall's preferred, negotiated, and oppositional reading types which provide a comprehensive way of describing all readings, except—as I showed in my analysis—the readings by the students of culture. Like Baudrillard they claim the privilege of moving in or out of the discourse at will. This would make four reading positions, not three. However, as I show, the fourth reading position is a false one: there are only three—preferred, negotiated, and oppositional—and the student of culture using Stuart Hall's classifications must work from one of those positions and project the other two. The difficulty with an object like culture is that we are always part of it. There are no privileged reading positions; our understanding of our lived experience and that of others is a function of position first and projection second. The problematic categories of class, ethnicity, etc., act as inflections that shape projected readers and authors. It is through projection that we incorporate ideology into our readings and this is the substance of much of what passes for cultural studies. Projections shape the reading of texts. However we should never presume from our own reading that we then know how the texts determine the reading. We do not.

In summary

One of the most significant features of the logic of

positions is that it straddles both critical and applied interests. It has the capacity to address our profound concerns about changes occurring in our society. Position is not simply a conceptual device; it grows out of a deep concern for our geographical and social position.

I would like to suggest that Australia's political and social history prepares us far better than our European or American colleagues for an understanding of the logic of positions. Through our colonial past and cultural dependence we are acutely aware of position. Indeed anyone who feels at the margins of things, whether that feeling is justified or not, has an acute sense of position. The difficulty faced by many of our American and European colleagues is that they come from cultures that automatically place them at the centre of things; they are dominated by a long tradition of imperialist ways of thinking which, irrespective of the ideological framework, creates the illusion that they are able, as if by natural right, to impose their way of thinking on the world. If you believe yourself to be intellectually at the centre of things, you have no need to articulate a logic of your own position—only everybody else's.

The imperial habit of mind is a severe handicap in communication research, since it blinds one to the fact that there is no position from which the phenomena of communication can ever be observable in their totality. I would therefore suggest that it may not be entirely accidental that a logic of positions should be developed here rather than overseas.

It is in the nature of our basic relationship to communicative phenomena that we are always

already participants; our presence within the landscape of communication deforms the landscape itself. This imposes on us, as teachers and researchers, a moral responsibility for our actions. As Robyn Penman has suggested, there is an inescapable ethical dimension to communication research. What we do is always interventionist. We cannot afford the illusion of the disinterested scholar. The actions we take affect others directly. We should therefore approach our interests with a degree of care. We should temper our grand visions by a sense of our own position. "...while we reach for heaven we must never forget that our feet cannot leave the ground" (Sless 1986 p. 160). 🌀



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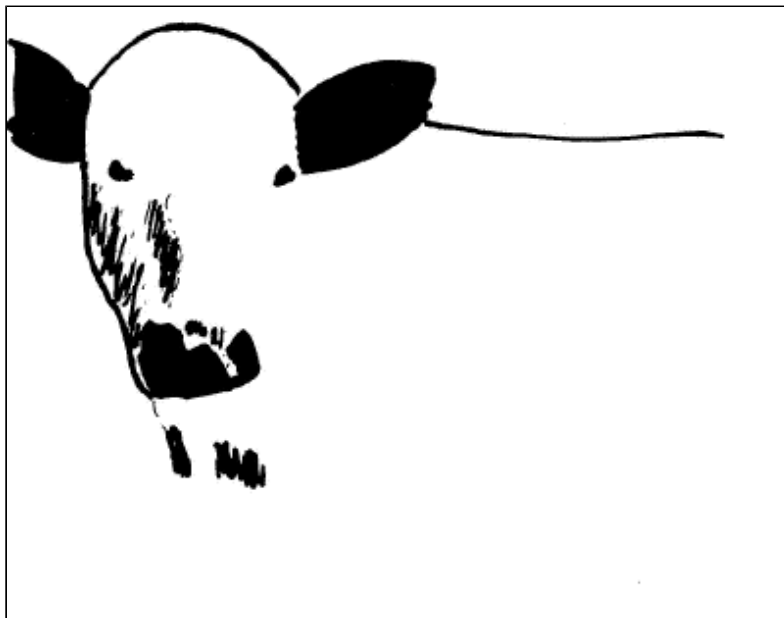
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Figure 2



[Go back to Figure 1](#)

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