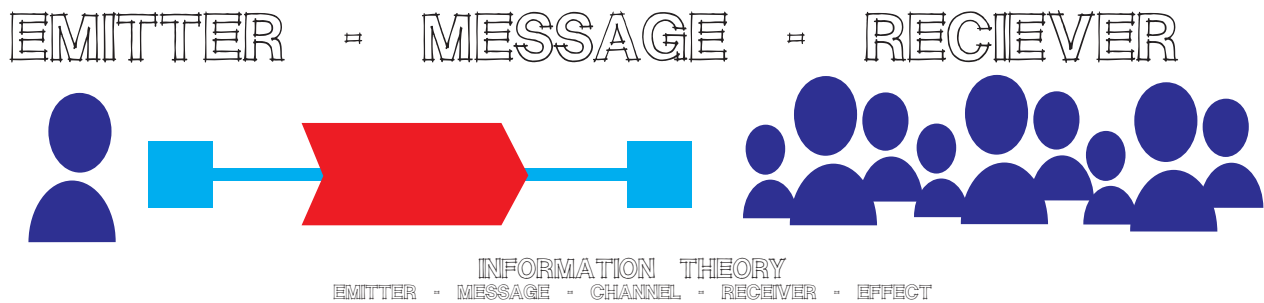


## INTRODUCTION

The Web was originally conceived as a *communication medium*. Later growth and maturation of *Web Development* techniques, with the incorporation of major companies as relevant players in the Web, has been marked by the tendency to consider the Web as a *software tool*, rather than a technology- enabled *communication medium*. A new medium that allows all the previous forms of communication to fit into, and extends onto previously unavailable options.

This poster presents a base of common ground (and some differences) between the disciplines of *Information Architecture* and *Social Communication*, as a means of pointing towards a rich source of methods.

The central argument is that the Web is fundamentally a communication medium, and the field of IA can benefit from this



Theory of Social Communication studies how people communicate, both at *interpersonal* level and through the organized elaboration of *messages* for delivery to *audiences* through different types of *media*, and the *effect* of these messages in the receiving audience.

The first modern studies of communication conceived it as transmission of information (Information Theory 1950s): a *sender* emits a *message* to a *receiver*, through some *channel* or *medium*.

Many of the early studies focused on political propaganda, and the effects of campaigns on the voting population.

During the 70's and 80's the focus shifted towards commercial advertising and marketing.

The construction of Websites can be analyzed from this point of view: companies send a variety of explicit messages to their customers via their Websites, with an intended effect. All of these messages are ideally in tune with a single strategy, coherent with the rest of the company's output pieces.

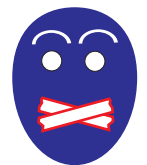
Information Architecture then has the responsibility of designing and organizing this array of messages into a single system.

## ONE CANNOT NOT COMMUNICATE

The work of *Paul Watzlawick* and the Palo Alto group in the late 1960s, know as the *Interactional Model* of communication, led to the development of five basic axioms for communication, the first of which stated that "*One cannot not communicate*".

This means that all our decisions and actions are telling a story about who we are. This notion has many echoes in Information Architecture, from the decisions we make in our *classification*, the dedication we place to the users in *navigation* interfaces and *interaction design*.

If you own a site that has all its content focused on customer support under a slogan such as "*we work for you*", but the interaction of your applications ends up behaving in a rude manner or does not support the users' needs, you're giving crossed messages. Your users will probably suspect that the explicit messages in your content are untrue, because your software's behavior is *telling them* that the company actually doesn't care about them, and actions give a stronger message than words. As a result, the company's image is harmed.



INTERACTIONAL MODEL  
 AXIOM 1: ONE CANNOT NOT COMMUNICATE

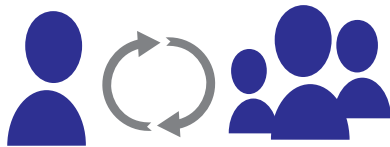
# COMMUNICATION AS BEHAVIOR COORDINATION

A different approach to Communication Theory was developed by Biologists *Humberto Maturana* and *Francisco Varela* in the 1970s, it defines communication as behavior coordination; this happens when two (or more) different beings are able to get in contact and share messages that lead them to do something in coordination.

“We call communication the coordinated behaviors mutually triggered among the members of a social unity.”



COMMUNICATION IS BEHAVIOR COORDINATION



CUSTOMER SERVICE

Information Architecture also deals with this kind of communication, many of the tools we build aim to enable this kind of communication. Each time we design systems that allow people to get in touch and solve a common problem; Companies are nothing but organized groups of people, so when we develop features that allow their clients to solve their problems we are building bridges that enable behavior coordination. When we design online communities, we are shaping this coordination, and what it may produce.



COMMUNITIES

## THE PROCESSES

### RESEARCH

Research is the first step for both fields, and both focus their research in analyzing the context, stakeholders and audience for the respective projects. The research tools used by both disciplines come primarily from **Social Sciences**, in both cases it is critical to obtain **qualitative information** from stakeholders and the audience.

There is one tool that is critical for communication campaigns, especially those developed for commercial products and services that is rarely considered by Information Architects: The **SWOT Analysis**. This tool enables you to identify your **Strengths** and **Weaknesses**, and reviewing the **Opportunities** and **Threats** that you face. This type of analysis was developed by - and is critical to - Marketing (an area of applied communication). Information Architects could benefit from this tool in projects that belong to highly **competitive markets**.

### STRATEGY

Both IA and applied Communication require the definition and statement of clear **goals** for the project and the types of **audience** (or users) that need to be addressed.

Communication campaigns continue with the definition of a clearly documented and all-encompassing **Communication Strategy** that guides the project as well as a **Creative Strategy** that guides the tone in which the message will be delivered.

IA, however, has not been consistent in the development of clear and **explicit strategies** for the projects it develops, nor in building frameworks from this. Information Architecture could benefit from analysis and strategy development tools derived from traditional communication and advertising in order to coordinate the many elements of each project in a cohesive strategy, one that is consistent with the general communication strategy of the rest of the organizations' media forms.

### GALVANIZING QUOTE

The work presented here started a couple of years ago in the form of an article, which has yet to be published. After laying out the basic structure of arguments to develop, I found the following proposition:

Denis Hlynka. April 1996  
Professor, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Acting Director,  
Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies - University of Manitoba  
(<http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/education/cmns/aect5.html>)

Home page as Communication

“A home page is a communication device. This implies that home pages should/could/might be usefully analyzed from within communication theory. This paper will show how two communications models can help to guide the web page designer from a theoretic perspective...”

# THE PROCESSES

## DESIGN

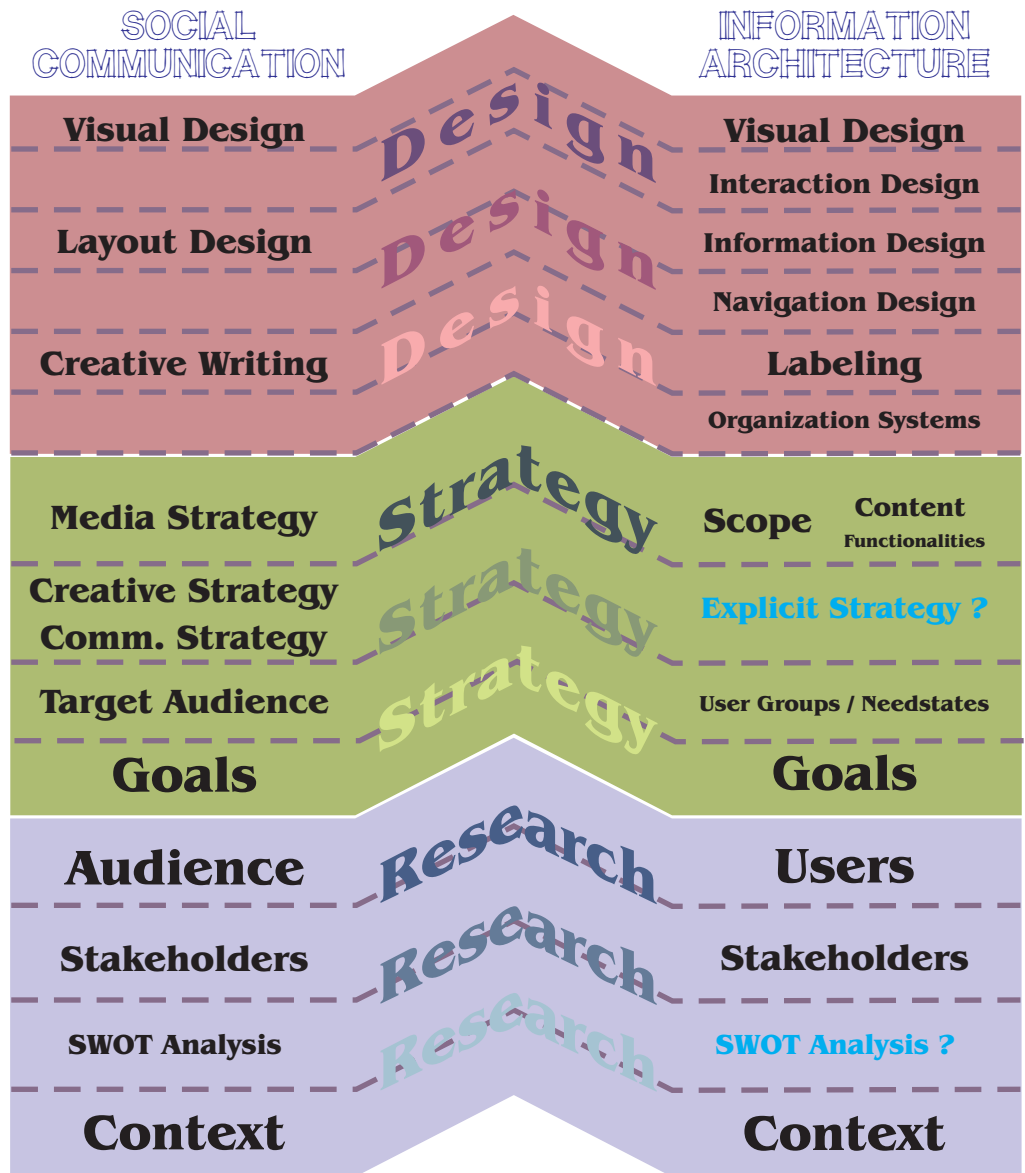
Communication campaigns don't handle the kind of vast information resources that Information Architecture does. The main areas of design that match in these two disciplines are Creative Writing - the design of messages via the use of written language, and Visual Design, including the visual array of the messages (Information Design), and their support and enhancement with graphics.

### Creative Writing

Applied communication makes strong use for creative writing in the creation of radial phrases and jingles, ad headers, slogans, product names and text pieces. All of these messages must distill a series of concepts into small phrases. These pieces must be clear and focused, engaging, and be based on the audience's language.

The process of **labeling** in IA comes as an extension of this speciality; we need to reduce large pieces of content into as few words as possible in order to deliver titles for articles, names for interface buttons and pages, taglines, page titles, and navigation cues. Although the focus in IA's labeling is mainly on **clarity** and **intuitiveness** -as opposed to **memorability** and **differentiation**, the main focus in communication - this process is similar in the way it requires high levels of creativity, and consistency within a unique strategy and vocabulary tone, related to the intended audience.

Information Architects could benefit from getting some training from traditional methods of creative writing in the development of labeling systems.



### Visual Design

Visual Design is the most notorious part of the majority of communication campaigns and has a large impact in the **overall perception** of a Website (including its usability).

Information Architects don't usually get to have much input in the visual design of their projects, this is normally handled by Graphic Designers who most of the times have some background, either academic or practical in applied communication.

Sometimes this step of the process is the only one approached from the point of view of communication, and it becomes a **friction point**. Again, if Information Architecture is approached with more cues from Social Communication, the whole process would be more **seamless and stronger**.