Professional Communication as a Prerequisite for Practical Action

Ladislav Tondl
Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences
Prague, Czech Republic
stsscz@cesnet.cz

Summary
The article connects with those who have highlighted the significant role of (a) integrating knowledge of different scientific and technical disciplines and (b) the integration of knowledge and values, including an efficient interplay between cognitive and practical actions. This article also develops the themes of the author’s previous works on the relationship of science, technology and society.

Key words: professional communication, knowledge, values

Foreword
This essay links up to the relevant initiatives proposed by the author’s external mentors who have highlighted the significant role of integrating knowledge of different scientific and technical disciplines and also of integrating knowledge and values, including an efficient interplay between cognitive and executory or practical actions. Seen in this light, this essay is also a token of gratitude and admiration for such personalities, including R. Carnap (Professor at the universities in Prague, Chicago and Los Angeles), T. Kotarbiński (Professor at the universities in Lvov and Warsaw), A. Weinberg (Professor at the MIT
and advisor to US Presidents – President’s Science Advisory Committee) and J.-J. Salomon (Professor of the CNAM and head of the Paris-based center “Technology and Society“).

The text of this study also develops the themes of the author’s previously published works on the relationship of science, technology and society, and the topic of science and technology assessment and their impacts – apart from other aspects – on the reflections devoted to science as a vocation (published in an almanac in honor of Professor H. Törnebohm of the Gothenburg University and a study on knowledge management, published in the journal “Chinese Semiotic Studies”, issued by the Nang-jing University, and by the German colleagues in the KIT – Karlsruhe Institute for Technology in 2011).

1. Introductory Notes and Basic Concepts

Professional communication is understood to cover those areas of human language communication constituting an essential component of the goal-directed actions that are considered to be vitally important and exacting in terms of knowledge and values and that are part of qualified professions, traditionally described as vocations. To operate in those spheres requires not only a long and challenging training but also a certain amount of charisma or devotion as well as dedication to the noble aims involved, by the way, as indicated by the names describing those activities in European languages (Beruf, vocation, calling etc.), a high level of responsibility, formulation of relevant oaths and other requirements, such as, for example, the necessity of life-long education, required diplomas, forms of accreditation etc. In this sense, a vocation is the work of a priest, physician, teacher, judge etc. However, work of a scientist and researcher and that of a university lecturer is a vocation as well. This particular idea was formulated by Max Weber.

A salient feature in this respect is the specific relationship of the subject of a particular vocation and the user of the knowledge and
values of that vocation and, therefore, the relation between teacher and his student, priest and believer, physician and his patient, clerk and citizens etc. This relation contains in itself a certain inequality, at least an inequality in competences and, thus, also in possibilities of utilizing the potential results of communication. As for some types of professional communication, these have in place what are known as specific rules of communication, covering especially forms of address, admissible modes of entering into communication, recognized patterns of expressing consent and disagreement, requests for concluding a discourse, interview or other forms of communication, its temporary interruption etc.

Mutual trust of all the participants in communication is vital for ensuring the substantial functions of professional communication, i.e. anticipated or desirable functions of a given type of communication. A pupil should trust his teacher in the process of learning, he should be convinced that the teacher is conveying to him important and necessary knowledge, that the teacher is, indeed, in a position to advise him or correctly answer the questions posed etc. By analogy, it holds that a patient should be convinced that his physician is capable of advising him well, of proposing an efficient therapy etc.

Seen in this light, professional communication lays specific claims on the available competences and prerequisites of all the participants in professional communication, while the key weight of these requirements is justifiably laid on the qualification, intellectual and value equipment of those subjects who represent the goals of the given vocation and the values of the individual types of profession. That is also why preparation for the qualification of these subjects should cover training in actual communication with the potential participants, recipients and users of the procedures, methods and means that are available at the highest attainable level of the individual types of such professions. (It should be stressed that it was already J.A. Komenský – Comenius who advocated such requirements for the profession of teachers.) Perceived as a lifelong educational process, qualification training also encompasses respect
and regard for the knowledge and value standards of the recipients or users of the available methods and means, regard for their possible future impacts, feasible procedures in further stages and continued operations, always with a view to potential dangers. The value standards in those contexts also include a high level of responsibility for the actual choice and decision-making relating to the selected goals and means, for the inevitable respect for possible differences in knowledge equipment, value orientations as well as in what constitutes such a target orientation, vision or teleological patterns of different subjects, active participants as well as recipients of the applications of the professional procedures.

In their action, subjects of professional communication must or should take into consideration the competences of those persons, or rather, in some cases, the competences of their legal representatives including their ability to receive and interpret submitted statements, to comprehend their content and also adequately to respond. A package of these prerequisites, constituting the core of such a competence, or rather, a complex of competences, is generated not only as the upshot of the processes of learning, experience and spontaneous and goal-directed learning but also as the result of influences of the social milieu, the prevailing life and value atmosphere, particularly within the family and small groups, the acknowledged and accepted social models and, undoubtedly, also the impacts of those identified and recognized differences in the actual environment and the actual world, and those visions, preferences and desirable goals and means which are collectively described as the “teleological world“.

Competences of the recipients of a message, which is an integral component of a certain professional action, is not, however, an unchanging outfit; it can be extended, supplemented and enriched. A classical example epitomizing this fact is the situation of students of higher grades who are well prepared for correct and successful reception and comprehension of a new subject matter during their classes in lower grades. In a similar vein, university lecturers appreciate the
importance of thorough secondary education (and thus also the level of the high schools from which good and successful undergraduates arrive). It is always useful if a teacher at a higher grade can reckon with and rely on previously acquired knowledge prerequisites, notably in individuals endowed with what is usually characterized as "talent" or "gift". It is also beneficial if the subject engaged in a professional activity of an intellectual nature already has at his disposal, or at least can assume and also expect, a certain receptive and interpretative standard of those who accept its knowledge, instructions and recommendations, advice or other communicated contents. (Seen in this light, the author can hardly fail to single out the experience of his own father and teacher who was always glad when he could "carry on" with his own class in higher grades, knowing only too well what he could not only assume but also to expect.)

A vital component of the activities pursued in a number of current types of exacting, complex and highly responsible and qualified domains should be a sustained growth of the standards and extent of knowledge and applicable methods and means. This particular requirement inevitably covers what used to be characterized as competence in the communication sense of the term. This is bound up with management of what is traditionally described as career advancement, methods of control, periodic evaluation of those prerequisites. That is why regular checks of the actual standards and related diverse qualifications are of great significance in a number of branches, such as health care and prevention, science and research, schooling and education. These include various and also required forms of certification, accreditation, evaluation of the results achieved, impacts and identified or just potential risks.

While one can express a certain degree of satisfaction that the above requirements and procedures are, indeed, successful and are, for the most part, gradually introduced and respected, one can hardly ignore that analogous control and evaluating attitudes would also be equally necessary and useful in some other, no less important branches. Examples of such spheres of action are primarily
large-scale investment projects, known from the communist past of the author’s own country, projects which were justified by the will or wishes of “the people”, “the working class” or simply “the majority”. However, we know today that a “majority” may be not only fabricated and manipulated with, and not only by monopoly power and its ideology, but also by other types of manipulative techniques, generated by the mass media or aggressive advertising. This also holds true of the composition of some so-called supervisory boards whose members are awarded their well-paid seats on the boards as a certain form of reward for their long-time political functions or for the “good services” in the interest of like-minded opinions and policies or individuals.

Addressing critical remarks at control and evaluating committees or panels naturally does not mean any attempts at casting doubt on the importance of the work of such boards. On the contrary, it is vital to stress the absolute necessity and need of such management, assessment and evaluation procedures which are required by the interdisciplinary nature of most of the tasks, problems and situations under scrutiny; and this involves not only domains such as science, research, the health-care sector, the sphere of human, social, natural and technical environment, but also most of the practical, everyday and, in many instances, frequently repeated situations. Seen from the current and perspective point of view, this interdisciplinary vantage point is virtually impracticable without communication and mutual respect among various branches and also different value criteria. It is definitely impossible to rely on the dictate and infallible decision of a single individual, however far-reaching and high-powered competences such a person might be endowed with. Therefore, responsible and highly qualified managerial and executive staff should select the best alternative solutions after extensive consultations of their advisory boards, following team discussions among qualified specialists who have not only proposed potential alternative solutions but who have also taken into consideration all the pros and cons, potential risks; and not
only actual dangers but also risks to be posed in further stages of a project application.

2. Conditions for the Success and Efficiency of Professional Communication

Professional communication, just like most other communication acts, is a goal-directed action, connected with a specific field of goals, intentions or functions, and its quality depends on the extent to which it is able to meet or safeguard such goals or functions, or – at least – to contribute to their implementation. Hence, such communication involves a statement possessing not only distinctly semantic but also pragmatic functions. But different subjects of professional communication may perceive the actual weight, significance and relevance of those functions differently. A case in point is a public warning to which different and usually also divergent recipients tend to attach different significance, either respecting such a warning or just listening to it and letting it go by unnoticed.

Professional communication is successful, efficient and functional if not only the subject of its source is authorized – and thus fully competent – to present professional communication of a certain type or to operate with a certain function, but also if the recipient is capable of accepting, understanding and respecting a pertinent statement. The subject of professional communication is, therefore, obliged to assume that the recipient will be able to receive his statement, understand that message and correctly interpret its content. Viewed in this context, he operates with a specific hypothesis of the recipient’s competence, which he, however, is able to keep on specifying or otherwise modifying, usually on the strength of the recipient’s identified and confirmed response. A certain supporting role may also be played in such a situation by the response of the recipient’s surroundings, identification of the impact of various factors and conditions that can affect or co-shape the recipient’s competence.
The subject of professional communication should also assume that a substantial section of the recipients of this communication will be able to understand his messages, will be endowed with a competence enabling them to use the content of the given message and to decide according to that content. This means that the subject of professional communication operates with what could be described as a standard competence of a specific type of recipients. A good teacher is able carefully to distinguish pupils of different educational levels; head of a working team or a thematically directed team will be able duly to differentiate his instructions, recommendations or advice addressed to various kinds of work actions or specializations. The knowledge and study prerequisites as well as training of teachers for different educational levels focused on their future practical needs are also differentiated; the same applies to pediatricians and other general practitioners, physicians with different specializations etc. The standard competence is, therefore, bound up with specific types of action, employing the communicated messages and the kinds or fields of actions connected therewith.

The notion of the standard competence of specific groups of recipients simplifies – or at least facilitates – to some sources of communication their activities. As a result, it is advantageous to set up groups of recipients, namely by presenting value patterns, by disseminating specific value procedures and, thus, universal or standard recipients or admirers of some tendencies, trends or cultural models. In the information society, the enormous spread of the impact of the mass media and also advertising has given rise to artificially generated large groups of unilaterally oriented recipients; these regarded as acceptable and normal only what carried the notion or coloring by values and preferences of the monopoly or ruling ideology. In this way, it is feasible to conjure up illusions that thus presented groups of recipients, expressing consent and often enthusiasm, represent, as is sometimes claimed, an image of the "people" or at least of a decisive majority. It is, therefore, not accidental
that the totalitarian regimes associated with monopoly and fundamentalist ideology were fond of presenting in the mass media such images and associated cults; especially images of huge crowds and closed ranks. Part and parcel of such illusions and cults are also notions claiming that the majority is always right; illusions about the importance of mass rallies, referenda and the infallibility of the majority. This, in turn, gives rise to an enforced harmony and consent with the prevailing values and positions, which are not only asserted, but frequently also exacted. On the contrary, differences and – generally speaking – otherness and any reluctance to march along within such “closed ranks“ may be a cause of a failure and often persecution.

3. Professional Communication and the Information Explosion

Man living in the present-day civilization is inundated with an influx of messages having the nature of instructions, commands and bans, recommendations and warnings or reports. These are characterized as significant and important, and their complex is sometimes referred to as the “information explosion“. A substantial portion of such messages has not been requested by the recipient; the recipient does not need them, they are often superfluous and, moreover, they lack the nature of information, i.e. the form of statement which reduces the recipient’s level of uncertainty, indeterminateness and ignorance. Most such messages pretend to look like professional communication, hence like statements whose author is endowed with a more perfect competence, and not only in the cognitive sense, but also due to specific powers or other types of authorizations, mostly artificially created. A large number of messages, demands and urgent recommendations is connected with the fact that a contemporary citizen is bound up or maintains relations with specific organizations, authorities or organized groups; his actions are dependent on diverse external functions or services, inclu-
ding transportation, housing, health care and other social services, provided not only by state-owned, public or regional authorities and organizations but also by private entities and individuals. Also officials representing such services usually pretend to be stronger, more competent and better-qualified subjects, often passing themselves off as authoritative subjects of communication. Even though such positions may prove to be justified in many instances, it is not suitable to show off power attitudes, primarily in situations where the recipient or user of a service of a given type has ordered such a service or even finances it himself.

Principally, it should hold that certain required actions pertaining to the application of qualified communication in a particular profession, and particularly an activity assignable to a specific profession, should be bound up with certain rules of communication, including modes of address, designation etc. Mistakes or unsuitable forms in professional communication, just as similar traits in any other communication, may give other participants of communication and, what is more, external observers or random witnesses of such a communication a picture of the nature and character of the subject of mutual communication who is the author or the source of unsuitable forms in a mutual dialogue. Hearing somebody on public transport address another person as a "dude", we can hardly form a good – and whatever positive – opinion of the author of such an address. A passenger on public transport who reads a yellow press magazine in a tram offers a similar image.

The information explosion and primarily the flood of news and messages provided by the mass media and the information technologies is known to have – and can also assume – many different forms and functions, including statements issued by various public administration institutions, organizations and agencies, services and providers of entertainment, advertisement and commercial messages that are inserted into reports and statements which have a completely different nature and function. The recipient of such a message may either register them, mostly with a slight degree of
interest, completely ignore them or simply dismiss them as part of the new information climate replacing what we have traditionally called a "breeze", "wind" or "hurricane", with the only advantage, i.e. that such a situation is only temporary.

In addition to being irritating, taking up too much of the recipient’s leisure time and unnecessarily occupying his mind, the information explosion also highlights the importance of a qualified, discriminating and exacting recipient who is capable of not only critically considering, selecting and accepting information but also resolutely rejecting and condemning it. The information society also paves new way to knowledge and, by extension, to a knowledge society. In this way, it expands the spheres of the actual world and also the world which we know and in which we can distinctly differentiate the good and the bad, the beneficial and the harmful, and in which we can also look ahead into the domains, possibilities and risks of the future.

4. Requirements of Professional Communication

An ordinary man, an average and common citizen tends to address a specialist, an expert in a specific profession or a man endowed with a higher competence than usual in a situation when the former realizes the shortcomings of his own possibilities, knowledge or competence, when he assumes that an expert and qualified specialist may give him better advice, design a better and practicable solution. Deficit of knowledge, of adequate capacities or attitudes to solving an identified problem situation constitutes a frequent source of and impetus for initiatives and conditions which require engagement of experts. It is natural that qualified experts themselves who have pointed out the identified shortcomings and problems and suggested possibilities of their solution may also become initiators of similar enterprises. One of the significant factors for the generation of such initiatives is, quite undoubtedly, also an effort for ensuring and setting up a network of one’s own highly qual-
ified experts, as confirmed by the knowledge, intellectual and also economic developments of some countries of the so-called "Third World". These nations – usually during their transition from the colonial regime and their traditional backwardness to full independence – had sent dozens of their talented young people to top universities in Europe and North America.

Seen in this light, professional communication, reducing the level of uncertainty, lack of knowledge or indeterminateness and providing new, broader and fuller knowledge, actually tends to broaden our horizons, highlights not only "new worlds" but also new possibilities of such worlds, possibilities of their use and, therefore, new uses, applications, benefits and profits, and – in parallel with that – newly identified risks, dangers and interrelated warnings. However, it is impossible to ignore that even professional communication, in addition to the actual expansion of horizons, may also be abused for obfuscating some components of the respective branches. For certain groups of recipients in my country, such obfuscation was epitomized in the recent past by the compulsory so-called ideological training courses and by the process of expanding the monopoly ideology during the rule of the monopoly power and its ideology. (This ideology had not only repudiated some scientific branches but also prohibited them, which later caused a considerable delay in their development and application.)

The actual quality of a received message is always of great importance for the recipient of professional communication, whether the content of such a message eventually proves to be beneficial, whether it reduces his identified and realized deficit of knowledge, whether it satisfies his expectations. To put it in other words, this involves the relevance of the content of a message. The term "relevance", or rather its qualitative and quantitative characteristic, plays a seminal role in each communication, and all the more so in the conditions of professional communication and hence communication with a subject which we assume to be competent, to possess adequate or reliable knowledge about communication of a given thematic field. The
term “relevance” is invariably relative, referring, as it does, to the relevance of the content of a message even in view of a given problem situation and a given thematic domain. The relevance of the content of a message may also be spelt out by the quality of the resultant decision and the outcome of a given action in which this content had been used. Based on such a reasoning, it is possible to introduce the term ”rate of relevance“, which is expressed quantitatively. (The terms “relevance“ and “rate of relevance“ were specified already by R. Carnap in his monograph on the logical foundations of probability. Due to the same reasons it is feasible to utilize the principles and procedures introduced by the theory of information or, to put it more precisely, the theory of “semantic information”.)

Professional communication meets the expectations connected with it as long as it is able to provide anticipated – and in a given problem situation – necessary statements which lead to positive and desirable results. Coordination and suitable integration of several important types of organized groups of actions are known to contribute to these purposes:

– cognitive, identifying and research activities ensuring new and more accurate knowledge of the existing empirical framework, including more precise knowledge of the empirical foundation, knowledge of theoretical nature, complete with available generalizations and rules, comprehensively described as cognitive group of actions,

– retrieval of adequate, already identified data and knowledge which have already been previously acquired, confirmed or applied, i.e. retrieval of the hitherto identified knowledge (retrieval actions),

– evaluation of the identified or retrieved and acquired knowledge (knowledge assessment) in view of the requirements posed by actions using such knowledge,

– a major group of actions is formed by a set of activities described by the term “knowledge management”, a domain covering decision-making and evaluating goals of knowledge application, no-
tably the issue who shall and who can use such knowledge, plus how to safeguard and protect it against possible abuse.

The achievements of the current information technologies and primarily the possibilities of using the Internet have given rise to an illusion that all the necessary knowledge and all the data needed in a given situation may be found on the Internet, which actually means that everything has already been discovered and is, therefore, known. That is why some wise professors justifiably criticize those of their young colleagues and future researchers and scientists who run away from their own research and work in the laboratory or from their own endeavors and new projects and who, instead, seek background materials for their doctoral dissertations solely in what has already been discovered or published. (It must be added that the latter should not definitely ignore what has already been discovered and published either).

Activities falling into the above-mentioned groups of action and their specific goals and means are efficient and beneficial when they are interconnected and when they link up to one another. A traditional example of such a linkup is the testing of hitherto identified data, procedures of verification of ascertained generalizations, hypotheses and rules, selection of previously acquired, already registered, published and verified results of cognitive procedures. The network of such interlinks and interrelations allows for a more specific identification of the actual orientation of goals and the selection of optimum means of individual actions, whether they have the character of cognition, search, evaluation and selection of the nature, goals and means, harmony of scientific and research activities with practical ones. (Due to these reasons, the concept of praxeology of T. Kotarbiński has proved to be an exceptionally significant initiative in this domain, guaranteeing progress of our civilization, while respecting human rights as well as human values, human and social friendliness of all the components of the complex network of such actions).
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