

LIBERATING VOICES

A Pattern Language for Communication Revolution

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**The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England**

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This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans on 3B2 by Asco Typesetters, Hong Kong.
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schuler, Douglas.

Liberating voices : a pattern language for communication revolution / Douglas Schuler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-19579-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-262-69366-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Communication—Social aspects. I. Title.

HM1206.S38 2008

303.48'33—dc22

2007039867

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1 Communication Revolution

Humankind's centuries-long journey is punctuated with revolutions large and small, where the general order is perturbed, and the lives of the people who are born later are profoundly different from those who live through those revolutionary times. It now appears that we are living in such an era. As we are constantly reminded, we are in the midst of a revolution in the ways that our species communicates and how it creates and shares information. Although we acknowledge the truth of that statement, we do not say "the communication revolution," because that implies that a single revolution is underway when, in fact, a million revolutions, some well publicized and some virtually unknown, are simultaneously coexisting and coevolving. Generally, in fact, thinking of "communication revolution" as a single revolution is tantamount to accepting the official version of communication revolution that, through obeisance to state and corporate leadership (and perhaps some well-deserved blind luck), the people of the world will naturally become more prosperous, democratic, and happy. We can trust the business and government elites to solve any problems that may emerge. They will sort it all out—don't worry! And in the meantime, buy and enjoy their vast array of dazzling products and services!

This book is devoted to the demolition of the official version of information and communication systems at the dawn of the twenty-first century and to the construction of alternative visions. Without denying the positive impacts that elite people can and do make, this book is dedicated to a radical orientation in which ordinary people assert their rights, and their responsibilities, as citizens of the world. It is my contention that the collective intelligence of the world's citizens, built on values, creativity, and courage, is also desperately needed now. In part this is necessary to curb the excesses of the world's elites, many of whom have drunk too deeply and too eagerly of their own self-congratulatory rhetoric and ideology and, as a result, sacrificed the common good, knowingly as well as unknowingly, to enhance their own privilege and power.

This book concentrates on communication as a crucial arena in the battle for equality and justice. Communication is key to any collective enterprise, and it is for that reason that we invite you to the communication revolution that is already yours to win. Our only request is that you acknowledge and take seriously your role as an active participant. This is a diffuse

and distributed movement. It needs leaders and followers, and people in this work frequently shift in and out of both roles. Everybody is needed in this struggle as we work to liberate the voices, and the thoughts and actions, of people around the world as humankind lurches warily and ill prepared into the uncertainties of the century that has just begun.

Do Not Believe Everything You Think

Countless written and spoken words assert that humankind is now living in a new age within a new society that has been characterized as the “information society” (by Daniel Bell and others) and as “the network society” (by Manuel Castells and others) and by many other labels as well. What many of these new conceptualizations have in common is the centrality of information and communication. This book takes a radical perspective that humankind can create roles for itself in relation to information and communication rather than simply laboring under existing ones. Rather than adopt these new labels for our time as master narratives and thereby relegate humans to the role of spectators in their own lives, in performances scripted masterfully and unerringly by the wielders of power, technology, and capital, this book presents a collection of new ideas crafted by people who believe that people can be creative and ethical and caring animators, not merely robots that buy, sell, obey, toil, and die according to their programs.

This book presents the first draft of a language for a communications revolution. It is intended to be an everyday guide for people who are working to shape a better future. Like this book, many of them are focusing on the information and communication systems that reflect and shape—for better or for worse—what humankind thinks and does. These communications revolutionaries are peaceful but insistent. They are working in a million places on a million projects. Their contributions are large and small, their ideas old and new, and their perspectives theoretical and extremely practical at the same time. The diversity is precisely the point: the objective of this book and the broader pattern language project is to characterize this unruly and uncoordinated revolution by integrating the totality of their efforts.

This language differs from a general theory primarily by its insistence on a formulation that stops well short of precision and certainty. The favored intellectual objective in the hard sciences is the ever better, but never complete, explanation of an objective and unchanging reality. Einstein's $E = mc^2$ may be the most elegant (and abstract) example of an equation that sums it all up, but its elegance is of little use to most of the world's inhabitants. Instead the practical world that humankind inhabits is almost indescribably complex and dynamic: it is unknowable in fundamental ways, messy and full of contradictions. Rather than summing it up, we spend our lives making it up as we go along.

The structure of our language acknowledges the enormity of this world: a world that can be seen as comprising three deeply interconnected and enmeshed worlds of distinctive as well as shared characteristics. The first world is physical and measurable and ultimately pro-

vides our sustenance. It includes natural elements like air, sunlight, water, and soil, as well as physical products of humankind like roads, buildings, books, pesticides, and bombs. The second world is the world of individual and social communication and interpretation, a world also complex—and messy. Paradoxically it guides our perception, but it itself can change over time. Within this world some people learn and grow wise; others may become banal, stupid, uncaring, and brutal. The third world is the world of the knowledge that we collectively create and recreate over time, a world of theories, disciplines, data, language, policies, institutions, laws, and taboos.

Our language, formulated as a pattern language (described below), is intended to address all three worlds. It is messy like the three worlds—and that stands to reason: it is inextricably linked to them. And it makes no guarantees. It defines no specific destination (which would be futile) or specifications for utopia. Nor does it assert a mystical purpose. Rather, it advocates a universe of ordinary and plausible actions that are likely to further complicate a complicated world, to push it in directions that may ultimately be important within the complex and poorly understood ecosystems of the three worlds and their interactions. It offers us tools not to define the world that we live in but to create it.

We named our pattern language *Liberating Voices* to signify its descriptive and prescriptive functions. Pattern languages comprise patterns, and each pattern is an encapsulated, peaceful revolt. Each pattern contains within it a built-in confrontation with a problem, and the application of the pattern is intended to help us overcome the problem and bring us closer to a more humane existence. The problem described in each pattern contains features of the world that we think need changing, features that perpetrate the status quo, with its system of few winners and many losers, a category that seemingly includes most people and the natural environment. The last part of the pattern is the solution, which summarizes the ideas that people are using to confront the problem, wrestle with it, and make some progress at subduing it, while the problem resurrects itself in another form. A pattern, then, is a form of seed. It contains a reflection of current work and thinking, as well as the vision of a future in which the seeds have sprouted and borne fruit.

Obsolete Assumptions

Until very recently most people assumed that the ways in which information was created and destroyed, modified, stored, and shared, were givens. Like the weather, they did not change—at least not through conscious intervention by ordinary people. But just as people are gradually acknowledging that human activities can affect the weather, people are also learning that human activities can affect the information and communication environment—and vice versa. Moreover, like our impact on the weather, some of the changes that we are inducing may be hazardous to our mental, emotional, and physical health.

The assumptions that we make are often made by default; they are supplied ready-made by the culture. Many people remain unfortunately oblivious to the fact that humankind's

communicative activities are in large measure conventionalized and institutionalized. These activities do not remain constant, however. They differ tremendously depending to some degree on the circumstances surrounding their origins. Spoken language, for example, is hundreds of thousands of years old. The World Wide Web, in contrast, is a few decades old at most. And although the information and communication environment is certainly the result of a collective effort (human language was not invented by scientists in a research laboratory), some contributors to this effort have had more influence than others, especially in our own time. Consider, for example, the clout of three men—Rupert Murdoch, Silvio Berlusconi, and Bill Gates—that seemingly overshadows the effects of millions, if not billions, of other less powerful people around the world.

The common—although false—assumption that some type of objective, or neutral, and reliable information environment exists now or existed at some point in history is slowly dissipating. Until recently only a handful of propagandists, social critics, pragmatics, paranoids, and advertising pitchmen would see through this convenient fiction. Now society is rapidly learning new lessons about communication. For one thing, as Claude Shannon (1949) made clear, communication and information take material forms. So although a single bit of information can be teeny-tiny, it nevertheless requires matter and energy to store and distribute it. Hence the vast “server farms” of Google or Facebook and other popular Web sites become necessary. From an economic point of view, information in a book, disk drive, or DVD becomes “content,” generic stuff that can be sold—hopefully at the highest price. Seen at the societal level, information and communication, at least in the developed world, are becoming ubiquitous and inescapable at the same time that they are becoming increasingly commercial and corporatized.

But quantity does not always translate into quality. When, as pioneering critics like George Gerbner (1998) pointed out, people get a large amount of their information (hence their ideas, beliefs, attitudes, interests, cultural biases, and so forth) from electronic sources with anonymous origins, then human culture has gone through a fundamental and historic shift. When the primary objective of those anonymous sources is accumulating money, votes, or influence, the always-on electronic environment represents an enormous amount of actual and potential influence. As these systems become more ubiquitous worldwide, the fact that they are corruptible, corrupting, and often corrupt should, at the very least, raise grave concerns about potential misuse. In fact given this immense power, it would seem derelict not to consider how those vast systems could be reconceptualized as collective assets of culture and wisdom, which, in theory, could put humanity and the natural environment ahead of the never-ending pursuit of cash.

Media Intervention

Recently, however, and with little warning, the cloud of ignorance appears to be breaking up—at least slightly. Signs that communication is the new battleground for freedom of ideas

are coming in from all sides. At the same time it would be hard to assign a precise date to the first salvo of the struggle. One reasonable marker might be the unexpectedly large public outcry in the United States in 2003 when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued new plans to allow large media companies to control an even larger share of the media market in U.S. cities and towns. After being besieged with vast volumes of blisteringly critical comments from people across the political spectrum, the extraordinarily business-friendly Congress in a surprise move pounced on the FCC and demanded a change in the policy with a lopsided 400 to 21 vote. A more recent example is the struggle for Net neutrality in which diverse organizations, including mutually antagonistic groups such as MoveOn and the Christian Coalition, joined forces to keep the major telecommunications corporations in the United States from reconstituting the Internet in ways that would be more subservient to their bottom line.

Why those sudden outbursts of revolt? It is not difficult to generate plausible hypotheses. Perhaps people had finally reached their boiling point. Perhaps the lessons of media critics like Ben Bagdikian, Robert McChesney, Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman, and Herbert Schiller had finally penetrated the consciousness of enough people. Perhaps the reality was getting too obvious to ignore, and the media refuseniks were finally attaining a critical mass. Ben Bagdikian brought the concept of the ever increasing “media monopoly” (1992) to our attention, while Chomsky and Herman presented their findings on “manufacturing consent” (1988), including the vast sums that the U.S. military spends directly to influence the U.S. public.

The Internet, moreover, was at the same time providing an increasing bonanza of new perspectives, which flourished in the fertile and undomesticated brine of cyberspace. Inquisitive readers could more easily find alternative and independent points of view within the U.S. and the foreign press that had previously been beyond the reach of the vast majority of Americans. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, for example, outlets such as the U.K. *Guardian* provided a welcome tonic amid the din of drum beating in the U.S. corporate media. Another explanation could be that people complained to Congress and the FCC because they could: people who had become increasingly aware of serious malfunctions in the official information sphere had both the motivation and the technical means (“click to send your comments”) to mount an attack when they encountered an overt and tangible policy affront.

The realization that consumers of news and other content are part of a complicated informational ecosystem has vastly complicated our intellectual landscape. It is hard enough to think about the information within a message without contemplating the biases, constraints, and other underlying features of the messenger who brought it to you. In the past, if CBS television told its viewers in the United States that something was true, *it was true*. If a story was not mentioned on the nightly news, an event in question was presumed to have never happened, and it certainly was not news. Now in an era when venerable institutions like the *New York Times* proffer subdued and belated apologies for slipshod and erroneous

coverage of events with national and international implications—like Florida’s highly dubious vote tallies in the 2000 U.S. presidential election or planted reports of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, which helped provide palatable rationale cover for the Bush administration’s invasion—readers and media consumers of all types must now acknowledge, happily or not, the additional responsibility of questioning each piece of reportage that they receive. Moreover, as people in developed and developing countries are increasingly recognizing the importance of the media as the powerful arbiter and shaper of public consciousness it is, battlegrounds suddenly are made visible where virtually none existed before and, just as suddenly, everybody becomes a potential warrior within that arena.

One skirmish in the war for information integrity can serve as an example. In 2005 a document from the U.K., the now-famous Downing Street Memo containing the claim that the United States was “fixing intelligence” to justify its invasion of Iraq was leaked to the public. The document was ignored by the mainstream U.S. press for over a month. Finally, after an extensive campaign by U.S. progressives, the media, in lockstep, belatedly determined that “fixing intelligence” to justify an invasion might in fact be news after all. Even then, professional journalists Michael Kinsley in the *Los Angeles Times* and Dan Millbank in the *Washington Post* impugned those amateurs who had the audacity to express an opinion on what was or was not “news” and to prod the professional media into reporting on what they believed was important.

Becoming the Media

The public’s new-found engagement with mass media, however innovative and paradigm challenging it may be, would still be playing a submissive position, tacitly acknowledging that traditional mass media systems with their deep reserves of power, privilege, and resources are firmly in control, if the public’s actions were limited to occasional reactions to dubious journalistic actions and practices. In other words, while it might be possible to influence the activities of the media conglomerates now and again, their basic trajectory may ultimately remain unchanged. It does appear, however, that the public’s work in shaping the evolving information and communication environment is extending far beyond playing cat and mouse with traditional media systems. The signs are beginning to become clearer that people are taking the suggestion of punk musician Jello Biafra seriously: “Don’t fight the media. Become the media.”

Breaking out from under the deep shadow of the large media systems will not be easy, and we cannot know now if any efforts to do so will be successful in the future. We do know with reasonable certainty that sporadically challenging their hegemony, however important that remains, will not suffice; creating viable competition is absolutely necessary. Fortunately, this is apparently what is now happening. Distaste and distrust of mainstream and popular media are high and increasing, and so is interest in both consuming and producing independent media. But success breeds jealousy, and any substantial growth in historically negligible

independent media, especially if it cuts into the market share of large commercial systems, may threaten the independent nature, if not the very existence, of this fledgling enterprise. User-supplied content is seen as an important area for economic growth, and even the largest, most predatory corporations have begun sniffing around in that area.

We have already seen corporate offerings that cultivate edgy, independent-looking products like fruit juice with funky labels; preripped, prestained, and prepatched pants; and out-of-focus, jarring videos and television shows with the gritty handheld look. Even less savory approaches to protecting media monopolies exist as well; several countries have explored or actually established laws that bar people who are not officially certified in one way or another from practicing journalism, thus containing dissent in the name of professional standards. Independent efforts can be killed in other ways with the stroke of a pen by friends in the legislature (of course, friendly but uncertified journalists can be smuggled into important press briefings, as was demonstrated when Republican operative Jeff Gannon attended Bush press conferences); when the threats are deemed significant enough by the powers that be, journalists can themselves be killed outright, a phenomenon that is not as rare as it ought to be (see any issue of *Index on Censorship* for a depressing eye-opener).

Several new civic approaches are emerging that run counter to the commercial-corporate-broadcast model, and many blur traditional boundaries like those between consumer and producer and between inaction- and action-based media. The profusion of new models signals an exciting and defining period of time; some of these models will survive and thrive, even as many will disappear or remain impotent at the margins; some will be subsumed by powerful institutions, while others, I hope, will promote a vibrant civil society with positive social change on behalf of people and the environment.

One important development is the establishment of alternative news sources. The community networks movement (Grundner 1993, Schuler 1996) of the 1990s provided the first widespread expression of civil society in cyberspace. The explosion of the World Wide Web, its commercialization, and the unpackaging and repackaging of community network services, coupled with the dearth of resources, all contributed to the decline in the movement (Schuler forthcoming). The birth of the Indymedia movement in the aftermath of the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in 1999 signaled a second-generation civic phenomenon. By employing a similar platform at individual locations around the world and, at the same time, being loosely linked to each other, independent media activists have created a worldwide network, technologically and socially, of approximately 180 locations around the world that simultaneously promotes independence (and the power of local autonomy and on-the-ground knowledge and context) and solidarity (and the power of cooperation and global framing). The proliferation of blogs has added to the vibrancy of new media forms in cyberspace. Although blogs started (and many remain) as idiosyncratic and personal online diaries, the blogging community quickly devised ways to create an interlinked collective information environment now commonly called the blogosphere, which, for better or worse, has become a factor in public deliberation and consciousness.

The blogosphere, for example, “reacted instantaneously, and often furiously” (Skolnik 2006) in reaction to the Bush administration’s alleged deal with three of the four largest local and long-distance telecommunications corporations to secretly collect records of telephone calls made by millions of U.S. citizens.

Another recent development is the use of communication in organizing actions. The opposition to the World Trade Organization in Seattle in the waning days of the twentieth century is generally considered to be the first successful use of the Internet and electronic communication by civil society in organizing on a large scale. It is vitally important to acknowledge that the online component was accompanied by extensive training and other focused face-to-face meetings (Starhawk 2002). And in early 2003, days before the United States invaded Iraq, two different kinds of events opposed to the war—angry mass street demonstrations and subdued and pensive candlelight vigils—took place nearly simultaneously in hundreds of locations worldwide.

Robert Muller, former assistant secretary general of the United Nations, remarked on this enormous incipient potential of the citizenry by saying, “Never before in the history of the world has there been a global visible, public, viable, open dialogue and conversation about the very legitimacy of war” (Wolner 2003). He was describing the unprecedented movement that arose spontaneously around the world. What this represents, perhaps more than anything else, is the advent of an immensely powerful force that Muller called a “merging, surging, voice of the people of the world” and James Moore of Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet & Society called “an emerging second superpower, which is ‘a new form of international player,’ constituted by the ‘will of the people’ in a global social movement.” Although the Bush administration was apparently not impressed by this worldwide renunciation of violence, this event may signal the possibility of a larger, more effective, and more coherent force for peace and human values that could yet emerge.

Not Just a Media Referendum

Since the media serve as the public face of government and other powerful elites worldwide, I focused on it considerably earlier in this chapter. The media, however, are, like everything else, embedded in other systems. What we have is a rough equilibrium between what the owners are willing to produce and what the mass audience is willing to consume. The elites control the media to a large extent. They write the policies that guide it, determine what is acceptable, and manage almost the entire edifice, including the Internet to a large degree. And millions of nonelites spend a good deal of their time consuming the available product (apparently whenever they have a chance). The point of this is acknowledging that the industry elites would likely be responsive to the demands of the nonelites if enough of them would demand it. The other point is that to a large degree, the media that we are stuck with (at this point in time) exist within cultural and social environments, and changing these environments can ultimately help change the media as well, an important task but far

from the only one before us. Ultimately we must not only think about how to make the media more accountable, we must consider what kinds of media, and other information and communication systems, we need. The better we understand that, the more likely are our chances of success in reshaping the world.

The Liberating Voices pattern language project is best seen as another experiment in the struggle to help build a better world. In chapter 2, we describe the project at a fairly general level starting with its motivation.

