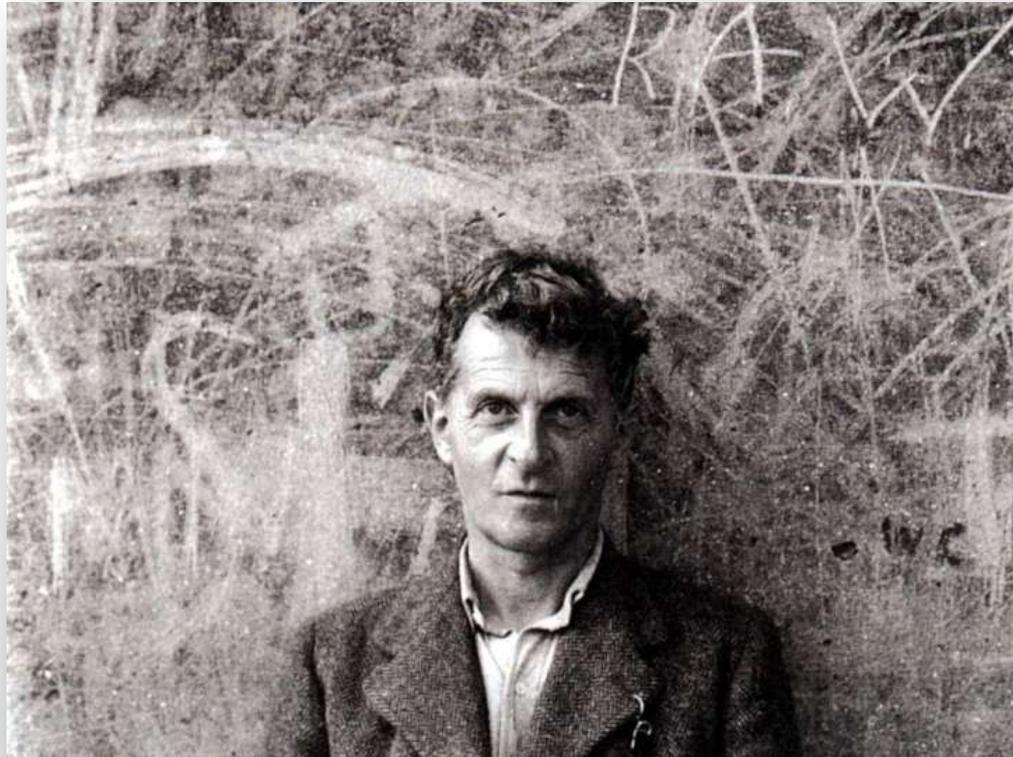Richard Harper *Microsoft Research Cambridge, England*

Information, communication

Yesterday, some reference to this geezer: most confined to the idea that concepts are to be understood in terms of their use

But he also remarked, more importantly, on the **stretching** of concepts beyond their meaningful application

One form of stretching: the role of a concept

Information - how can one use the concept sensibly?

Isn't it like the concept **truth?** –it's one that is to be defined in relation to particular instances

It makes no sense to define it in the general – doing so suggests that one doesn't know what the concept means – one cannot define truth in the general, for example, one knows it's a resource for investigating the truth of something in the particular

Yesterday there were some very good examples of exploring what information is in **particular instances : o**f how particular content of various kinds gets 'worked'   - as in the case of electrical engineers

A second form of stretching: reductionism

Can one reduce content types to an elemental form?
Yes, but when it is **appropriate** to do so – when it affords traction

Take **Shannon's** topic: **reductionism worked for him!**

But don't think that one can easily go back to redefine the thing **reduced**

Human communication **can be reduced** to 'information' for engineering, but can information be used **to explain** human communication?

What happens when you try?

Human communication

The case of Shared Editors

Never went anywhere. Why?

Then the Media Space

(More is better – but what more?)

Video tunnels

(Fitting glances to lookings)

Ten years later….

C-Slate
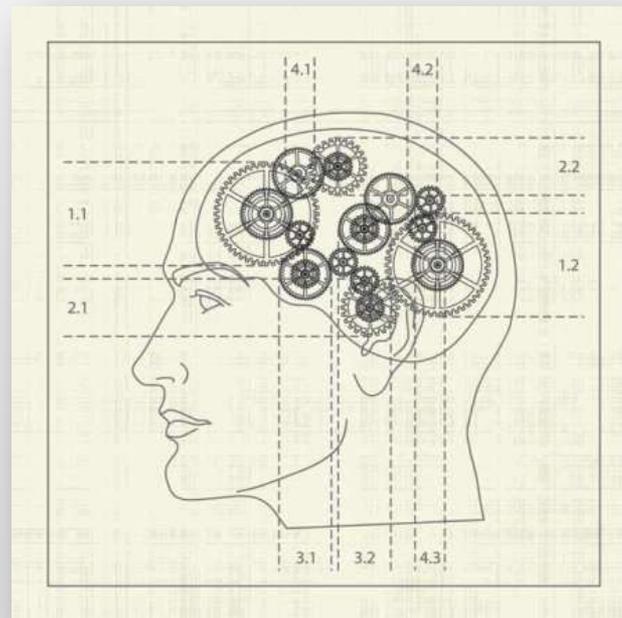Touching documents
(Fitting touches together)

The body

A mechanics of fitting
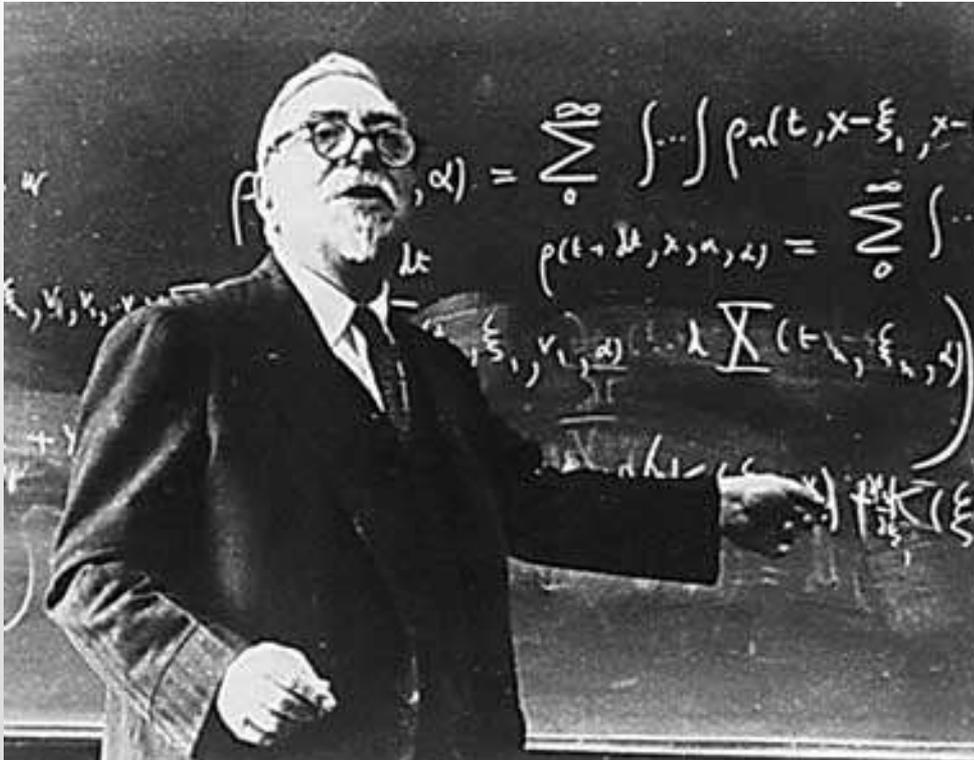
The fitting of bodies
in space and time

Google Wave

Information and communication

Reductionism around information tends to adopt the machine metaphor

(Video)

What are we?

Shannon
& Weaver

Weiner

Pentland

What happens when you go from information processing as a reductive reconceptualism back to the act of communication being merely information?

Weiner

Contrary examples: Glancing

Scenarios of use

Very little
of this

Lots of this

Making reasons to communicate

Lots of design examples….

Social Touch

Reassurance

Connectedness and togetherness

Expressing identity

SOCIO-DIGITAL SYSTEMS GROUP

So, what is communication?
Is it about exchange?
(of something)

This something?

An mental object – Locke

As merely information? (Shannon)

A language object – 'thoughts as things' (viz, Kantian-Quinean 'thought')

From an inner soul – the solution to solipsism? (Viz, Durham Peters)

As manifestation of primal cognitive need – a metaphorical act of (embodied) sexual touch? (viz..?)

These either derive from metaphors

Or **reductionism** when the reductionism has been taken the wrong way (with Weiner)

Perhaps a better way of answering this question is to look and ask a different question
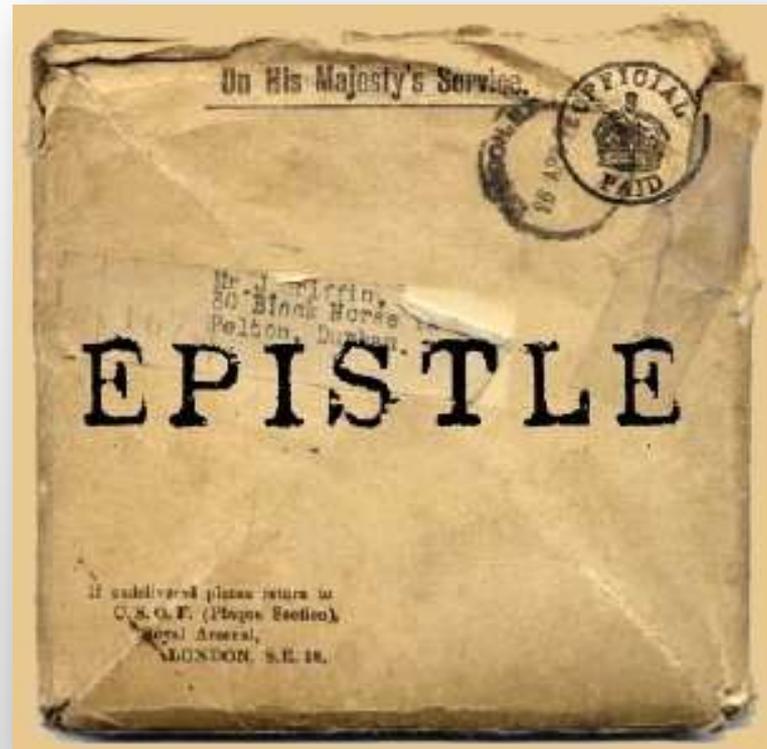
Why do people communicate?

An example: the letter

What kind of 'cultural practice'?

A letter is…

**Epistle-like
Whispered intimacies
between two people**

T

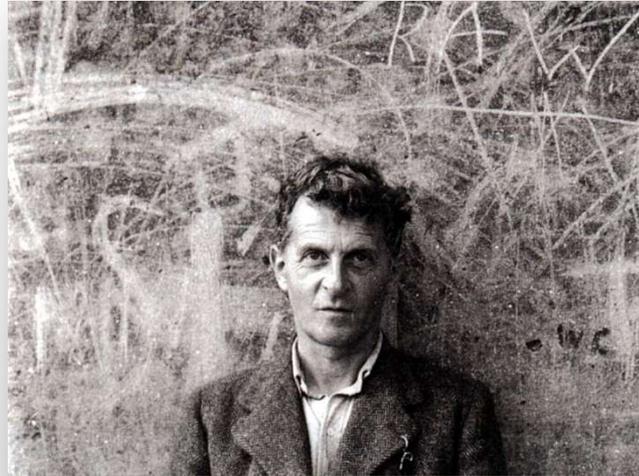# So, what is communication?

The question is better put this way:

'*What is it that people are* **doing** *when they send a letter, summon a glance, or post to a family device?*'

Think of it as **performative,** *not as information exchange*

Notions of information processing and capacity get us only so far in explaining and understanding these acts

What is the right language for this?

I think we have an incredibly rich set at hand given the form of lived experience – its diversity, experiential qualities, and our understanding of it

We communicate because we want to:

- tell someone something
- show affection
- find out if others care for us
- pass the time of day
- be courteous to others
- entertain
- entrance
- because we are obliged to

We communicate because we want to create a bond:

- a bond of information exchange – bonds of work
- a bond of physical desire – bonds of the body
- a bond of longing – bonds through time
- a bond of presence – bonds in space
- a bond of status – bonds on society
- a bond of dizziness – bonds of play
- a bond of dull resentment – society or anger?

- Tell them something
- show affection
- find out if others care for us
- pass the time of day
- be courteous to others
- entertain
- because we are obliged to

- a bond of information exchange
- a bond of physical desire
- a bond of longing
- a bond of presence
- a bond of status
- a bond of dizziness
- a bond of dull resentment

A *texture* of human relations

It turns out that different channels allow new ways of enabling these bonds, these weaves of connection

Texting – intimate, whispers
A written letter – calm reflective
Voice calls – tantalisingly ad hoc

But
Texting – permanent, private, keep-able
A written letter, permanent, give-able
Voice – unrevisable, losable, refutable

So why?
It depends on the relationship in question, and hence also the persons involved
How they want to perform their bond-making

**If you want an approach that is appropriate,
It's a philosophical anthropology, not a
processing modelling approach;
It's Hacker, nor Bateson
It's talk, not 'information'**
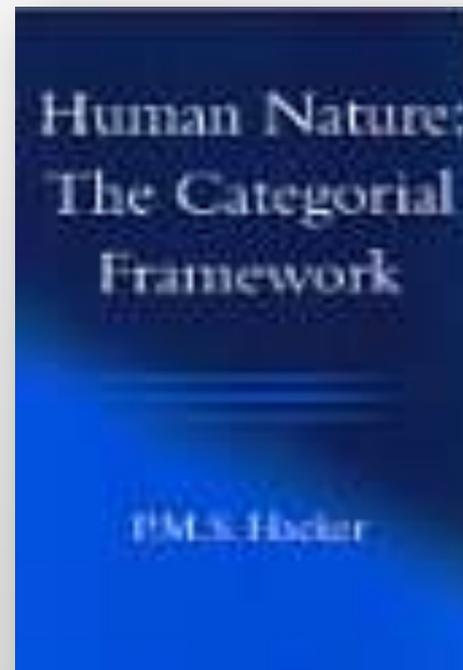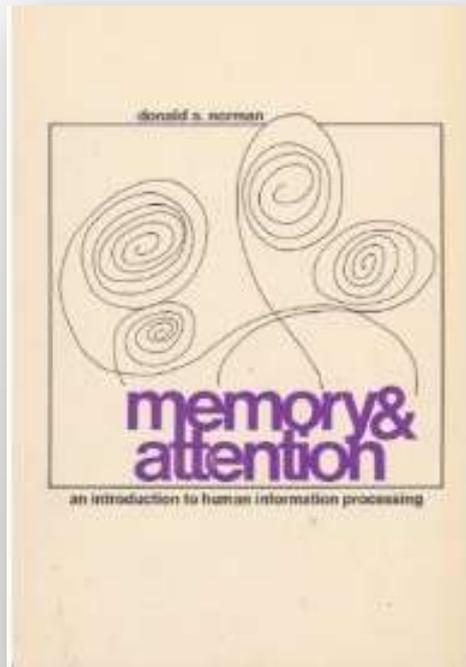
That's our doing for you
A bond of performing and listening

Thank you