

# Intercultural Communication, the Print Medium and the Ideal of Two-way Symmetry in Interaction

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## Abstract

The Norwegian authorities emphasises two-way symmetric communication as an overall ideal to create a good relationship and communication with the public. Based on the report «Communication in Intercultural Encounters: The shaping of school-home co-operation» (Roald 1998) the paper focuses on the Norwegian authorities' common use of print information to the public as a basic tool to achieve these goals.

The paper investigates how print information may influence the capacity of certain first generation immigrant groups within the intercultural audience which the authorities specifically want to reach in order to make them become communicative and participating. In this respect the paper questions options and limitations as regards written information in intercultural communication in cases where there might be cultural distance and/or low reading capability or, in other cases, dissimilar practises related to print information.

The paper discusses that much understanding and interpretation of the text in the print media is partly based on tacit cultural knowledge inherent in the text. This is a knowledge that both interacting parties must share if the medium is to function as an effective intermediary and cultural door opener for people of a variety of cultural backgrounds. Also, to function as a real intermediary the authorities need pay attention to specific needs in the audience as well as the audience having the capacity to master print information as a genre within the large group of print medias. In relation to two-way symmetric communication the paper explores the concept "communication middle region" (Meyrowitz 1985) as a possible contribution to see alternatives to traditional ways and modes in co-operative strategies.

**Keywords:** two-ways symmetric communication, print information, first generation immigrants, cultural distance, low-reading capability, dissimilar practices, tacit cultural knowledge, "communication middle region".

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## 1. Background

Printed information (1) is given an important role in intercultural communication within Norwegian borders. The authorities heavily rely on the print media to inform first generation immigrants in Norway about how to live and survive in the country. This article problematises some general aspects about such strategy, particularly with reference to the effect and factual applicability on the receiver side. Focus is on information in brochures being produced and distributed by the Norwegian immigrant and school authorities. The printed text is seen alongside with pictures (photographs and drawings) as extended text. Pictures may support what the text tries to inform. As well they may carry a message of their own in addition to visualising tacit messages in the text. The article primarily aims at revealing some general aspects of how printed information may work for certain first immigrant groups. The case to throw light on the subject is a group of immigrant mothers' reactions to information about the Norwegian primary and lower secondary school system. All attend language courses in Norwegian, an organised setting where any immigrant (2) is guaranteed to be confronted with the brochures' content. The discussion is seen in relation to the authorities ideal of two-way symmetrical communication in public life, profiled through the Communication Principle. The question is how the principle works in the light of

intercultural communication? Here the article tests out the concept Middle Region Communication as a descriptive analytical and normative approach to understand the print medium in a two-way symmetrical communication process.

## 2. Models and principles

State information activity has the principle of two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig and Hunt, 1984:22) as the overriding ideal profiled through what is referred to as the *Communication Principle*. Here the actors are understood as equal partners in the process of communication and information. With the Communication Principle as a background it will be an ideal aim that Norwegians and immigrants should be able to inter-act as equals (NOU 1992:21). With respect to a multicultural public the Communication Principle involves particular challenges that have only been problematised in general terms in information policy. This applies particularly to printed information in relation to the principle of two-way symmetrical communication.

An underlying model of two-way symmetrical communication is the Co-orientation Model (Chaffee and McLeod 1968; McLeod and Chaffee 1973; Suzuki 1997). This model identifies *agreement, accuracy and congruency* in the comprehension of the message between partners in communication. The concept of co-orientation provides input for describing how actors create social meaning for themselves and for one another through communication acts. How this works is more clearly profiled in the *Convergence Model* (Rogers and Kincaid, 1981; Kincaid 1988; Windahl et al 1992). The model emphasises a communication leading to joint action. Messages and information that each of the communicating parties receive and communicate are interpreted and understood on the basis of a cultural situation and psychological reality. In a convergence process these various realities are often to be negotiated in order thereby to reach a more common understanding - telling of both agreement and disagreement. Thus both descriptive and normative aspects attached to the Communication Principle as an operational concept are conditional upon the fact that actors succeed in clarifying and understanding one another's "frames" for inter-action (Goffman, 1986).

Dilemmas linked to the Communication Principle are often referred to as differences in *cultural capital*, which Bourdieu (1977; 1995)(3), broadly speaking, defines as a system of mental "evaluation schemata" for perceiving the world around us and assigning values to it. It is these "schemata" which for instance decide or influence values and value choices with respect to how people evaluate the same thing in "others". The Norwegian authorities, in manifesting the Communication Principle, only to a limited extent problematise this link between culture and differences in information policy in public life. Particularly as regards large scale cultural differences this article is therefore an effort to develop the Communication Principle in relation to intercultural communication. In this connection I shall take as a starting point Goffman's concepts of *backstage* and *frontstage*, which he uses as metaphors for the process of inter-personal inter-action (Goffman 1959). Goffman's point is that on the frontstage we play out our communication actions, while these same actions are planned backstage. The problem with Goffman's theatre model is that it only to a minor degree captures social change. Here Meyrowitz (1985) supports with the concept of *Middle Region Communication*. His point is that the sharp borderlines between peoples own understanding of backstage and frontstage are erased in a number of connections. That is to say, in communication, people may find themselves in situations that force them to redefine their conventions applying to what information they allow others to have access to. As such the Middle Region metaphor has many features in common with the Convergence Model. In comparison, however, the Middle Region metaphor appears to contain more options with respect to intercultural communication and an analysis of social change (Roald 1998). My point is that in spite of *or* as part of the ideal of two-way symmetrical communication, the state authorities to a great extent take the printed form as their *basis* in communication with the public. A multicultural public may challenge such strategy. In fact cultural differences may make it necessary for all parties to redefine or renegotiate their own understanding of relevant communication media. Yet, to the Norwegian authorities the print medium has been chosen to ensure like information for all. The question is whether "like information" presented in this way also safeguards the principle of two-way symmetrical communication? My hypothesis is that printed information can be problematic in this picture especially in relation to differences in cultural capital. The problematic aspect is connected to the fact that printed information is abstracted speech and as such is abstracted communication (Goody 1990). Such a choice on the part of the authorities will among other things mean that few possibilities are afforded of discovering *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi

1966; Briggs 1988; Rolf 1991). In print information this will be the knowledge that we more or less consciously read between the lines. Newcomers in a country, due to being unfamiliar with the national context, may find such information to be difficult to identify and describe. We must imagine that this especially applies to intercultural communication in which we know that differences in cultural capital show great variations. In this connection I find it useful to link tacit knowledge to *script* (Abelson 1981) as a subcategory of mental evaluation schemata (Bourdieu 1977; 1995). Abelson defines script as a schema of events that describes general features of types of event which we make use of in particular connections and to which we more or less consciously ascribe particular social frames and frames of action. As I see it, intercultural communication tests out these scripts and schemata. Seen together they constitute the actors' cultural capital; yet our internal understanding of what current cultural capital is to be, is challenged by the communication situation. More so, at all levels of communication the tacit knowledge challenges the actors due to the unconscious built-in aspect. This knowledge is not made visible until there are crises in which people's scripts and schemata for social action are provoked and activated. These are at the same time signals to the parties that they perhaps need *new* knowledge and *new* insight to come to terms with each other. In such a process both script and schema must be reckoned with in the communicative relationship as important cognitive structures.

Not least the *choice of medium* may function as an important meta-message in intercultural communication. Here McLuhan (1964) points to that media are a matter of more than a traditional understanding relating to the press, radio and television. In addition to new technology our bodies, thoughts and ways of being can also function as media. Stating that «the media is the message» McLuhan directs our attention towards a central feature of the media that concerns both their ability to change direction and function in inter-personal relations and activities, and the fact that a medium can include one or more other media. As we will see in the following section this may involve different combinations of spokesmen and interpreters in a communication process alongside or, in addition, to the print medium.

To test the significance of both the choice of medium and tacit knowledge and to test the Middle Region concept as both a descriptive and normative concept, I have chosen to carry out an introductory experiment in the form of a mini case study in which I test two information brochures about the Norwegian primary and lower secondary school aimed at immigrants. (4) These brochures aim to give a first introduction to the Norwegian school system and to what Norwegian schools stand for. In terms of method I use non-structured data collection, that is to say data collection in which questions and answers develop between the researcher and the informants (Launsø and Rieper 1993). 10 adult women immigrants constitute the test group. Intentionally the brochures are distributed to the test group with Norwegian text because this is the language to which they must relate in all public contexts.

### 3. Printed information and linguistic presentation

#### Information about Norwegian schools

The brochures were distributed to the 10 women immigrants while they were receiving tuition in Norwegian including life and institutions. They had been living in Norway for between one and five years and represented a broad spectrum of religious and ethnic diversity. Four of them were Muslims, two from Bosnia and two from Kosovo; three were Buddhists from Vietnam; one was a Catholic from Malawi; two were Orthodox Christians from Poland and the Ukraine. All of them had children who were pupils at different levels in local Norwegian schools. All of them had experience of and an opinion on "Norwegian schools". As such they were not unfamiliar with parts of what the brochures attempt to say something about.

Having Norwegian teachers' opinion about simplicity in mind I initiated the experiment with the brochure with all the photographed pictures. I chose to read the text of the brochure together with the participants. Things went slowly even in the introductory phase. At last we had struggled our way forward to the word "duties" on the first page. For the participants my explanation of the word opened the door to a number of interpretations, generalisations and stereotyped notions about Norwegians. In particular the acrimony was connected with sex education in schools, about which there was nothing in the text. Why on earth must pupils learn about that sort of thing!?! Mrs S. from Kosovo gesticulated violently, half shouting and half-shrieking out her anger while the other nine ladies nodded approvingly.

"This is something I alone want to tell my daughter! This is not the teacher's job! My daughter is much too young (17) to understand what it is all about! You Norwegians have a problem. Parents have no control of their children and leave it to the school to put things right. Ha! You know, it feels like somebody raping me! I cried when my daughter, and my son too, showed me their schoolbooks. (5) This shows a lack of respect for Muslims!"

I decided to put the information brochures aside, but tried at the same time to find alternative angles of approach to present the text. I was unsure how this would be received and what direction the course of our communication would take.

### **Two-way symmetry in intercultural communication**

The test group had behind them between 300 and 400 hours of tuition from an introductory course for immigrants in Norwegian, geography and history. The Norwegian school authorities consider this to be a lot. Those of the participants who were refugees (from Bosnia, Kosovo and Vietnam) had not experienced any lack of information about Norway and Norwegian conditions, they said, since they were all in a situation that demanded relatively frequent contact with public authorities. Here we know already that public services and institutions base a significant amount of their contact with the public precisely on printed information to provide a means of establishing communication. Seven of the participants had therefore been introduced to the UDI brochure, but only the Europeans had received it in their own language. The brochure with the photographed pictures was new to all of them. All together the majority of those taking part in the experiment had a certain amount of knowledge of what the brochures contained. So why all the acrimony?

The stress placed on balanced and equal reciprocity in communication and interaction by the Communication Principle is a normative ideal. Here the Middle Region concept requires of the parties that they should initiate a reciprocal communicative relationship. In this picture it may seem that the print medium may play a more problematic and ambiguous role than the state authorities basically realise. In keeping with Grunig and Hunt's public information model (Grunig and Hunt 1984:22) printed information of the kind we are talking about here is basically asymmetric and linear. It is transmitted *from* the authorities *to* the public. This means that at the leading edge among the public there must probably be a relatively thorough open and tacit understanding of the message that is being conveyed if the print medium is to be able to become part of two-way symmetrical communication. Here the experiment shows, when the text is explained, that there are several aspects of the message in the brochures that not one of those participating in the experiment is aware of. To reach an understanding of problematic aspects of this situation I shall first take a closer look at text and language in order thereby to be able to analyse the significance of print in intercultural communication.

### **On text**

From a semiotic starting point Goody (1990) defines text as an abstraction, that is to say as a symbolic and condensed presentation of matters in daily life. He demonstrates that text is both a symbolic presentation of the spoken language and just as much a symbolic tool for providing abstract representations of human action. As abstracts in the form of signs these "representations" can be conveyed over long distances. The actual speech and the actions are displaced in time and space. The difference between a subjective human experience that is interpreted, and the interpretation of printed text as information, in other words lies in the degree of proximity to or distance from the reality that is "read", what it gives the public information about. Tveiten and Førlund (1997) stress that printed text does not only appear at a distance from the reality in which it originally took its point of departure. In the same way as a subjective interpretation the text also reflects a specific understanding of reality. By virtue of his or her position the sender of a text has the power both to define the content of the information and to build opinions into the text. "Understanding" in a hermeneutic perspective furthermore includes "interpretation" in the light of the researcher's own advance understanding (Paulsgaard 1997).

With a semiotic and hermeneutic starting point a person who transmits or passes on information about a text attempts to convey the sender's interpretation of premises for comprehension and opinion formation (Schein 1987; Guneriussen 1996). Problems or crises in the informative relationship arise when the sender and receiver do not share the same *cultural capital*, for the receiver of the information will always interpret in his or her own view of what the text is trying to convey. For instance, when I myself am in

the role of the receiver and reader of a Norwegian text, I know as a rule the culture in which the text was created and I know the degree of cultural breadth and flexibility. This is *my* tacit knowledge in relation to the message of the text. This means that the whole time I can read between the lines and put much more understanding and interpretation into the text than the words that are there to be read. I know the scripts and the complex "value schemata" that the text is based on; that is to say, the tacit and open culturally determined perception of society, that makes the text comprehensible to me *and* not least makes it *a usable medium* of communication with the other party. On the other hand reading a text in another language – I need go no farther than to the neighbouring countries Sweden and Denmark – in many cases requires a different type of cultural capital. This entails other interpretation schemata and scripts. Without this alternative cultural capital I shall only experience the "Swedish" and "Danish" with Norwegian interpretative schemata. I shall have a limited possibility of perceiving the text as it was originally conceived and intended and at the same time of seeing where the cultural boundaries go and where there is congruency with fundamental values in what is *my* cultural capital. I need knowledge of what open and tacit meaning is signalled in a text in order to be able to see more co-orientation, that is to say to achieve factual agreement, accuracy and congruency in the communication between the sender and myself as receiver. This seems to entail that I must first know the context to which the words and text relate; that is to say the context of the text and to some extent what is defined in linguistics as *pragmatics*. Lyons (1983) defines pragmatics as the relationship between language use, language users and context together with what makes us able to produce and interpret utterances in a concrete situation. I too need such pragmatic insight. Only then can the text really function as an effective medium for me. In the experiment this same factor means that the participants must be able to read the text in the brochure in relation to Norwegian discourses on immigrants and refugees in Norwegian society as a whole. Altogether here lies the basis for the interpretation of the impressions that the text as a whole is seeking to convey. In this there is in addition a tacit understanding that for the interpretation of the actual text and comprehension of the meaning content, it is required that the public has learnt to see systems and coherence in the words on the paper. To be able to derive any benefit from the printed information the participants in the experiment must consequently know the grammar at a relatively advanced level. In linguistics this is defined as *semantic knowledge* and means knowing how the set up of the information makes use of particular rules of language and grammar (sense) for utterance formation and argumentation (meaning creation). In other words - the members of the test group need considered and conscious knowledge of the fact that the printed medium presents the text with different linguistic determiners in the construction of meaning. Here they demonstrate in everything they say that their insight is very inadequate. From Norwegian quarters it is constantly maintained that "they had better learn Norwegian then!". This statement at best reveals a naive and unconscious ignorance about learning a language. The language is "just below the surface" in Norwegians who say this. This means that they are in reality, without themselves being conscious of the fact, referring to complicated linguistic structures that a person whose native language is not Norwegian may have difficulty in getting hold of. The statement thus often becomes a meaningless phrase for those whose mother tongue is not Norwegian because the concept of "Norwegian" relates to a varied register of context, time and place that the public must often be familiar with to be able to get meaning out of the text. In other words the authorities may signalise particular meanings in information brochures without it is being certain that the public can "read" or interpret the message that is intended – even though the public has perhaps learnt to "read Norwegian". Getting meaning out of the text is consequently *conditional* on the fact that the public is familiar with factors relating to linguistic presentation; that is to say, the role of language in the construction of meaning and text.

### **Linguistic presentation**

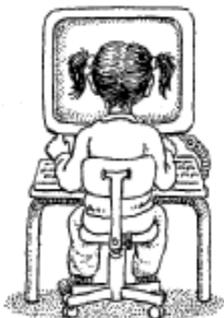
Fairclough (1989, 1995), Hodge and Kress (1993) and Martinsen (1997) emphasise that a tacit premise in the case of language is concerned with linguistic presentation. Linguistic presentation must be seen against a more underlying perception related to the connection between language and thought, and then the effect of language on action. Thus a language is not a neutral means for thought, nor is language within a given cultural context a neutral tool when one describes or argues for a phenomenon, topic or matter. Thus language presentation in printed information has significance for the construction of meaning, a factor that Tveiten and Førland, Kjeldstadli (1997) and Martinsen discuss from different angles. Their point is that the sender conveys meaning in text through selection, value evaluation and creative combination of words with a view to establishing the concepts of the sender's ideas and opinions about systems and links between people and institutions. In order to mark this more clearly the sender

may use extra means; for example the use of pictures such as photographs and drawings. Vagle et al. (1994) call them *contextualising signals* that may be an effective aid for emphasising what one intends to convey in the information. At the same time pictures may also contain underlying, more indirect or tacit messages. In this latter instance, as both Lakoff (1980; 1987) and Kjeldstadli emphasise, pictures may function as metaphors for something that one wishes to signalise but not to say directly. Here Fuglesang (1982) shows that photographs are often that part of printed information, which, irrespective of language and social background, is easiest for the public to "read". Both the brochures contain pictures in the form of drawings and photographs, the very reason why Norwegian teachers say they appreciate them so much. What signals do the pictures transmit?

### Pictures as metaphors and contextualising signals

All the photographs and drawings in both brochures show a predominance of women. This is perhaps not so surprising since the information is concerned with primary and lower secondary education. Here we know that in particular at the lowest levels in Norwegian schools there is a predominance of women everywhere. In most classrooms we find women teachers, but we know that particularly at the higher levels of primary and in lower secondary education we also find men. Yet women have all the positions of authority in every single one of the 15 pictures in both brochures taken together

The two information brochures come from the central educational authorities for schools. Taking this fact into account it seems a likely possibility to interpret one tacit message in the pictures as a signal of the place of women in public life in Norway - and as such - carrying a tacit hint to cultures with a different norm for practice. In one of the drawings the authorities mark a clear break with traditional notions of sex roles. Here a girl is working at a computer (traditionally: tough/masculine activity) while a boy is playing the piano (traditionally: gentle/feminine activity). (6)



friends, but she is to be found sitting as the only girl in groups of boys. It is tempting to interpret this as a tacit message about liberal attitudes in Norwegian schools when it comes to daily contact between boys and girls. For what parents is such an announcement interesting?

The first impression of the *printed* text particularly in the UDI-brochure is a fairly neutral one. The use of drawings and photographs strongly modifies this impression. It is tempting to interpret the printed text together with the pictures as a tacit message signalling a specific *understanding of a problem* on the part of the authorities concerning the target group for the brochures. Through naming and clothes in both brochures a clear hint seems towards Muslims, and in general to foreigners with a different physical appearance (dark skin, afro-hair). Yet, we know the features of all the dominant groups of immigrants in Norway suits "the Nordic" look. Those tacitly aimed at between the lines represent a contrast.

The authorities' marking of whom are both the potential and actual target group has common features with the results from the investigations conducted by Campbell (1995) and Van Dijk (1995) of western news media. They show that there is a tendency to connect minorities and immigrants with problematic or negative factors in society. The media profile the sensational, the exotic, the socially unacceptable and scandalous. In the same way as in the information brochures the immigrants are presented in contrast to white, western people. "They" are different and have a lower status. Thus the silent language presentation through the use of pictures in the two brochures emphasises Fairclough and Lakoff's discussion of the fact that the power of language lies in its ability to define. Pictures and drawings, together with the printed word, can be used here in a way that shows that language contains socio-cultural opinions and attitudes that are linked both to trends in the present and to new knowledge. Here the use of pictures in the brochures can easily be interpreted in the direction of signalling an unspoken and stigmatising "*problem*" attitude and *problem focusing* in respect of an important section of the target group – those who have supposedly little insight into Norwegian conditions *and* who need the information most.

Similar factors have also been emphasised in recent Norwegian minority research (Eriksen 1991, 1994; Aase 1992; Wikan 1995; Tvedt 1996; Lien 1997; Breivik 1997). These contributions tell of social attitudes to and opinions about "them". Further they tell us about the significance and influence of the fact that there are in society such attitudes to and opinions about "them". The views that a Norwegian public can read out of the text in the information brochures will have crystallised in the light of such discourses about "us" and "them". An analysis of the text and thereby also of the information in these brochures can then give us signals about perceptions of differences between for example ethnic Norwegian school actors and newly arrived immigrant actors in the same system. Further we shall be able to find out how such differences are taken account of or ignored. Here the frequent use of nouns in the definite form and of modal auxiliary verbs can be the bearer of signals. This applies especially in the case of the noun *duty* and the modal verbs *shall*, *must* and *ought*, all signalling something that one is expected to do. In sentences with generally valid, brief and superordinate information about Norwegian schools and education, such words signalise rhetorical and grammatical devices with a normative and admonishing undertone. Thus, the built-in information announcements to parents in the target group are that "some people" have problems with normal rules of conduct in Norwegian schools. To whom this might apply is signalled through the use of Muslim names, through a specific type of dress but also in the form of distinctive external physical features.

All this is the *authorities'* perception of many in the target group. *And* these are premises for opinions that I and other *readers in the know* can *interpret* from the text; that is to say, a signal of an authority problem-oriented perception especially towards "non-western" people. More interesting to me just now is whether the receivers of this information read the same message from the text or are excluded from this interpretation of its meaning when they cannot read the text.

#### **4. The target group and particular considerations**

Mrs M. from Malawi said that she had perhaps not been to school so much, but what she had experienced of school in Norway was not particularly different from what she was used to at home "except that you have more books and the teachers are much too kind, if you ask me." The other participants particularly noticed the last thing she said. The two from Eastern Europe amplified on "kindness" by saying that they never thought their children had any homework to speak of. Was this right? The ladies from Vietnam

remained relatively passive in this discussion and were unwilling to utter any criticism. They had hardly been given any schooling at home, so they thought it was wonderful to have a school that "did not cost anything". Nevertheless they did say that they thought there was far too much play here. "How can the children learn anything? And how can the teacher get any respect? These are things that it is difficult for us to understand". They pointed to the classroom photographs which they said gave the impression of lack of order and discipline (the children are sitting in groups and not in rows and columns with their attention directed at the teacher), a statement that Mrs S. immediately supported, adding to it with her own experiences and shaking her head as she spoke. Just as interesting from the researcher's position is that my interpretation that the pictures convey stereotyped and at times tacit ethnocentric messages that might provoke their public, was of little concern to the test group. Critical comments from the test group revealed a search for answers to matters totally absent in the two brochures. The pictures in the school textbook are much more provocative because they make visible something that for Mrs S. and the other participants in the experiment is culturally taboo as regards public life. It is the tacit message of this type, among others, that members of the target group feel a need to understand; that is to say, to put "the Norwegian way" within their own scripts and mental schemata. They search for information that is not meant for discussion in this type of brochures, however, which in its turn may create the foundation for more symmetry in communication with the authorities. Aase discusses similar factors concerning Pakistani immigrants' adaptation strategies on the Norwegian labour market (Aase 1992: 222-223). Knutsen takes up the same dilemma in relation to Vietnamese immigrants:

"The information they receive is either so compact or so general and abstract that the receivers find it problematic to identify with the text and link it to their own situation in life. Both the general and the detailed information contributes in some cases more to confusion than to enlightenment." (Knutsen 1986:105).

Aase and Knutsen's point is that facts in information brochures are generally not presented with the intention of meeting the public's many questions on that level. Such facts are tacit knowledge that the public must possess in advance – yet knowledge one cannot simply expect the target group of these brochures to have. This means that printed information of this more general type is first and foremost of interest immediately one is new in a country, but then in a language that one understands *and* given a public that can read. When the public begin to be able to find their way about in the Norwegian language, many will perhaps, like the members of the test group, have been in this country for a long time and experienced many things that it will not be so interesting to read about once again in a brochure. Seen in this way this type of brochure represents a paradox: *when the public can fully find their way about in the Norwegian text, the general information has long since become uninteresting*. Even at the present stage at which their reading skills are still poor, the test group reveals that the time is overripe for deeper cultural insights. More than providing information in itself, the brochures now open the way for associations and reflections about conditions in Norwegian society that the target group does not understand. This means that to be able to exploit the tacit potential in the brochures in order thereby to be able to live up to the Communication Principle and further facilitate Middle Region Communication, a context is required that provides room for particular considerations. Is it possible to achieve such an approach in this experiment?

### **Particular considerations**

The Communication Principle is concerned with laying the ground for room for action and experiences that can provide a foundation for fellowship and a feeling of belonging. This is the same as Rogers and Kincaid show with their Convergence Model and as Meyrowitz defines within his use of the Middle Region concept. This is something more than what Goffmann defines within his use of the concepts of backstage and frontstage. Goffmann approaches the Middle Region concept in his discussion of frames. At the same time "frames" can easily be associated with rigid boundaries. Yet in intercultural communication the actors in very many connections experience a great need for flexibility and openness. At best one can in Goffmann's terminology speak of flexible frames. Meyrowitz's Middle Region concept seems to meet the demands of flexibility, innovation and new thinking in the direction of particularly the second principle in state information policy (SI 1998). This concerns *active information* from official quarters, something which in practice is a matter of laying a low threshold for the effort that users with few resources have to make themselves, particularly in the area of information about duties

and rights. Here the concept opens the door to considerations for practice within the target group as a key factor in laying the ground for reciprocity and one's own effort in the communicative relationship.

In the test group the majority were in varying degrees in difficult stages of their lives in which they had little energy to draw on to be able to investigate Norwegian society. At the same time this is also a critical stage in which the need for more knowledge about Norwegian conditions can be of extreme urgency to overcome life crises. Seen from the position of the researcher it is constantly my experience that this often makes quite specific demands on public actors such as information providers/intermediaries between the authorities and the target group. Knowledge of text as a medium and language presentation here represent only two of several partial aspects.

Personal observation of the target group for more than 20 years in different parts of the country (Roald 1985; 1998) roughly tells of two main groups – those who read or can read the brochures and those who do not read or cannot read them. This latter group I assign to the category "poor readers". When I exclude great variation with respect to social, financial, national and ethnic background, the majority of so-called "poor readers" have most often come from areas defined by Norwegian authorities as southern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. This corresponds with geographical areas to which the authorities are paying particular attention (NOU 1985:29). "Poor readers" have often shown themselves to be *illiterates* or *functional illiterates*. (7) However, the same people have often been good listeners to information conveyed orally. Other "poor readers" have had a tradition both for written and oral practice – depending on what type of information was involved. In relation to public authorities and the fact of obtaining and relating to information, the immigrant public have in other words resorted to both different information strategies and media. Most homes have also made extensive use of radio and television as well as of the telephone. This tells us that the homes *in theory* have, and have had, many possibilities of keeping themselves up to date in society in general and of obtaining knowledge about things that the authorities believe it is important that they live up to. As far as the test group is concerned, all the participants can read and write their mother tongue – albeit with varying degrees of skill. All confirm a general trend that I have constantly seen repeating itself: *when Norwegian information has concerned important matters, oral transmission has been the most common method of communication, irrespective of level of language proficiency*. It is therefore no surprise that the participants in the experiment put aside the information brochures they were holding in their hands and wanted to talk. My first understanding of the further discussion is that the word "duty" is especially provocative. It is possible I am mistaken, that the word must rather be regarded as the key to other different conditions lying behind the scenes, especially when account is taken of the different cultural and religious situations of those taking part in the experiment. Despite these differences, here there seem to be tacit elements in the word "duty" that in different ways provoked all the participants. I want to know what.

### **Abstract language, norms and culture as barriers to communication?**

First and foremost "duty" is an abstract word. So are many other words in the text, but do not provoke any reaction on the part of the public in the same way. What is special for the word "duty" is that it carries within it determining notions about what one is *required* to do. Thus "duty" is particularly signal-bearing with respect to open and tacit cultural values and norms and is thereby also an effective port of entry to an understanding of central elements in communication crises. The test group's subjective perception of "duty" – when the participants have the word explained to them – is that it stands as a reinforcing symbol of and an abstract metaphor for their own impotence that the ladies feel they experience in communication with the authorities. The ground they give for this is their lack of influence with respect to what the authorities present to their children in the way of knowledge and insight. Here Mrs S. used the word "rape" to emphasise how difficult she felt this to be. She signalled that her own understanding of control and insight was threatened and thereby her own and the whole family's fundamental understanding of values, and cultural and religious identity. To emphasise this and to create a negative contrast with her own values, she picked out what she had seen that she thought to be unacceptable behaviour on the part of Norwegian children at school and in the street.

In the crisis that was provoked a situation was thus revealed that tells us that in relation to intercultural communication not only text in itself can be problematic. In given situations specific linguistic expressions can contribute to blocking the way for the ideal of two-way symmetry. At the same time it is perhaps precisely in such situations of crisis that we have the possibility to establish a middle region for

communication. The condition is of course that the parties want to continue the dialogue and interaction. Here it may happen that the many normative orders in the text of the brochures function as barriers to communication, particularly for those who do not understand the message and can easily misunderstand. For me it is interesting that the test group did not mention this as a primary problem – at any rate when the text was explained to them. Then it became clear that they were particularly trying to get at the tacit knowledge of which the printed text said nothing. When that was revealed to the test group, the participants showed both positive and negative involvement in relation to the message in the text. In answer to my question about why they were so concerned with sexuality and sex lives, Mrs G. from Kosovo said: "Where else can I talk to Norwegians about these things? Here we are all women. I couldn't talk about such things if there was a man here (the others nodded approvingly). And – you are married, you've got children; you understand ...!" With these words Mrs G. was in reality calling for a redefinition of all our traditional frames of understanding of backstage and frontstage knowledge in our communication – myself in the role of researcher and provider of information – the others as the participants in the experiment. With sexuality and sex life as the angle of approach she was subconsciously staking out a course to an experience of Middle Region Communication for everybody present. She signalled at the same time that this was to happen *exclusively* within the intimate framework of the female company. With a man present the Middle Region Communication would immediately have had another frame.

The experiment thus shows that Middle Region Communication in an intercultural context strives to create new frames and mental schemata and scripts for understanding, interpretation and interaction. The symmetry aspect is shown by the fact that the parties in one way or another try to create something that can be common to both parties (fig. 4.1). The dialogue shows that this "something in common" can change and vary from context to context because not all themes are equally viable everywhere. Middle Region Communication is thus a flexible concept. It is also important to note that even if the communicating parties open the door to more backstage insight on the part of each other, this does not mean that the door is opened to everything. Some backstage insight is kept in what Meyrowitz calls "deep back stage). The dialogue in the experiment also shows that the Middle Region concept is not necessarily synonymous with symmetry. In intercultural communication some people open the door to more backstage insight than others do. Seen in this way the Middle Region concept provides the ground for an extended understanding of the Communication Principle that first and foremost emphasises symmetry in balance.

#### Person A. Person B.

Middle region

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Deep backstage Traditional communication arena Deep backstage

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Backstage Frontstage Frontstage Backstage

**Fig 4.1** *The Middle Region Model* illustrates that conventional borders are broken down in people's interaction and that people protect part of their backstage in what is referred to as "deep backstage".

In the experiment both the test group and I in the role of conveyor redefined our own understanding of backstage and frontstage. For me this meant that without causing any shame to anybody I had the opportunity to enter into a dialogue about Mrs S.'s symbolic experience of rape. I did this by playing on my own experiences. Perhaps this might create a more open angle of approach for sensitive associations that have their origin in the text? I tell them that I was younger than MRS S.'s daughter was when I had to move for good from *my* family (culturally impossible for Mrs G. and Mrs S.). I even lived in a totally different part of the country and saw my family only twice a year. Only I myself could defend my honour (read: sexuality). It was not easy, but this is how it was for many others as well, both boys and girls, who did not come from towns (most of those participating in the experiment came from villages) and who wanted to receive higher education. By comparison I thought Mrs S.'s daughter was lucky, because she lived at home and could talk to her mother every day. Furthermore Mrs S. had family in the city. She could discuss things with other women in the family and find solutions to problems that made them angry. The school textbook it was not so easy to do anything about. There were certainly Norwegians as well who also complained. To put the whole thing in a broader and more historical frame I gave a

glimpse of political/religious developments in Norway. This was something the participants in the experiment recognised from similar discussions in their own countries. Seen as a whole, I tried to give the Norwegian interpretation of sexuality and sex lives in the school textbook a more comprehensible frame. My intention was particularly to make much less dramatic the participants' feeling of impotence and to contribute to increased self-confidence and understanding.

My "joint" strategy appeared to work, especially when I spiced up what I was saying with comic - sometimes hilarious - glimpses from the days of my youth and adult experiences in the area of sexual relations. Soon my stories were replaced by stories from the traditions of six home countries concerning falling in love, love, marriage and sexual relations, sexuality and the bringing up of children. Several also took the chance to discuss difficult matters here in Norway, in particular the effect it has on family life to have unemployed spouses. Gradually the atmosphere became more relaxed, more secure and more conciliatory. The ladies were ready to accept features of their own culture and home country which signalled that the contrasts were perhaps not always so enormous after all, that here there were parallels even if the first contact with specific interpretations might be experienced as a violent attack on one's personal identity, integrity, and important, strongly norm-bound values in one's own culture. They simply did not manage to get this experience straight from the text, but had to have the possibilities afforded by dialogue as an aid. As Mrs G. from Kosovo put it: "It is such a long time since I went to school (23 years), reading is boring. I am not so good at Norwegian, but I can see that lots of things in Norway are the same as they are in Kosovo, but there is also a lot that I don't understand - how Norwegians think. You know, but I don't!" In other words the participants in the experiment were not protesting against the insights of sex education and information about sex life in themselves. Their subjective experience was more that the authorities gave them no choice, did not take cultural considerations into account and set aside the principle of "own terms" which the authorities profile in their policy of integration (KAD: Stortingsmelding nr. 84, 1978-79; NOU 1995:12; KAD: Stortingsmelding nr. 17, 1996-97). Particularly for the Muslim participants this was a sore point. For them it seemed particularly difficult to accept that they were not in a position to set the premises for *how* they wanted their children to learn about matters that from a cultural point of view might be perceived as problematic. Hitherto this had been *their* responsibility, especially in respect of the daughters in the household. This responsibility is linked to the family honour, to the individual's worthiness to be honoured, and to social respect, which again all come back to the family honour. Now the women feel that this responsibility has in many ways been taken away from them without it being clear to them how lost honour and control are to be re-established in the daily lives they are leading now.

In order to contribute to making room for more mutual understanding and insight I moved in my role of provider of information beyond what I in the first instance, from a general Norwegian cultural position, would interpret as acceptable normative frames for interaction; so did the participants in the test group both in respect of one another and of myself. Together we tried to see solutions to a theme which, without such a discussion, might be experienced as threatening when they did not know the background and history surrounding the Norwegian norms and premises. The participants in the experiment showed here that they were open to the need to create room for joint cultural experiences, which the Norwegian authorities also indirectly profile as a superordinate ideal through Communication Principle. Here Meyrowitz makes the point that joint cultural experiences form the foundation for Middle Region Communication - the same thing that Bourdieu emphasises in relation to viable cultural capital. With Middle Region Communication as an analytical concept the researcher thus gets input for an understanding of factors connected to tacit knowledge which in their turn can be linked to conflicts, acrimony, rage and rejection in the communication process. At the same time Middle Region Communication allows for crises and conflicts to be there as part of the process of intercultural communication that paves the way for more mutual understanding and insight. Thus the concept also becomes a normative ideal. Development of the Communication Principle in intercultural communication must in other words open the door to the possibility of interpreting crises in order thereby to be able to pave the way for two-way symmetry. Precisely crises signalise a need for greater acceptance on the part of all the actors of what it may mean that people's mental schemata and scripts are put to the test in the cultural encounter. For the researcher precisely crises function perhaps as the most important methodological angle of approach in the study of communication and information processes in intercultural communication. This is also emphasised by Bourdieu (1977) in his study of Kabylia in Algeria as a background; by Latour (1987) in relation to innovation and technology research; by Måseide (1997) in a field study from a somatic hospital in Norway, and which I myself (1998) have taken as a

starting point in my discussion of intercultural encounters in Norwegian society with an empirical basis in the primary and lower secondary school. Analytically speaking crises in daily life thus tell us something about the degree of symmetry in the communicative relationship, which at any time may be the source for adjusting what one can add on or ignore in the process of creating the foundation for Middle Region Communication as a norm. Printed information will be one contributor in this process – *when* it is understood *and* experienced as interesting.

## 5. Conclusion

Norwegian authorities base much of their starting point and foundation for communication with the public on printed information. The superordinate ideal is two-way symmetry profiled through the Communication Principle. Printed information in intercultural communication makes specific demands on the target group and on forms of transmission. Furthermore printed information in intercultural communication makes visible differences in cultural capital. The demands that are made and the differences that are made visible necessitate a convergence process towards the establishment of Middle Region Communication. Middle Region Communication seems to carry in it much of what is aspired in the ideal of two-way symmetric communication. Certain concerns can be identified:

- 1) **Demands.** The receiver of printed information must be able to read the language with both pragmatic and semantic insight to be able to get meaning out of the text and thereby give a response to the message. This means in practice that the receiver must also master the register of tacit knowledge that is built into the information with reference to more superordinate societal conditions.
- 2) **Other forms of transmission and media.** When the target group does not satisfy these demands, printed information may still function two-way symmetrically, but now with the aid of dialogue with an intermediary who transmits the text orally. This dialogue has the advantage that the communicative relationship can use physical means such as different bodily movements, use of voice, mimicry and so forth, to convey the message.
- 3) **Particular considerations.** For communication to have the character of two-way symmetry the situation may require that the parties find ways of tackling differences in cultural capital. They may perhaps have to redefine mental schemata and scripts for what it is relevant to interact about. Here the process also entails a change in the understanding of viable frames in the communicative relationship in which the parties loosen their grip on their own conventions linked to perception of backstage and frontstage. In as much as any information relationship always has a built-in asymmetric power relationship, it seems essential for the successful transmission of the information that the sender observes particular considerations to accommodate the target group. Without particular considerations the printed information risks simply remaining an internal measure in the bureaucracy where the text may contribute to reinforcing already negative attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices that might prevail. Particular considerations thus entail allowing for 1) variation in cultural practice in the target group for the management of information and 2) the possibility of receiving information with one's present situation in Norway as a starting point. Only at this stage does it seem relevant to link the concept of Middle Region Communication to the process of interaction.
- 4) **Middle Region Communication in intercultural communication** a) is linked to dialogue that occurs between people there and then (synchronic dialogue) because communication itself is dependent on active negotiation about standpoints in the communicative relationship; b) is contextual in the sense that not all themes are relevant for all fora; c) requires pragmatic insight and knowledge extending over a broad cultural register on the part of the person providing the information in order for him or her to be able to give the information the character of agreement, accuracy and congruency in line with the Co-orientation Model; d) must reckon with crises as an important and often necessary part of the communication process, particularly with respect to making visible tacit knowledge in the parties that blocks a communicative relationship.

- 1) Printed information refers to any written material in *printed form* of a standard type, as in this article.
- 2) «Immigrant» in this article refers to any first generation newcomer to the country irrespective of causes for being here.
- 3) Bourdieu (1955) is an abbreviated Norwegian translation of Bourdieu (1979) "La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement".
- 4) The first brochure "The Norwegian Primary and Lower Secondary School" contains a total of 15 pages. It has only been printed in Norwegian. Subsequently I have seen some pirate editions in Urdu and Arabic. The brochure was published by the Grunnskolerådet (Council for Primary and Lower Secondary Education) in 1986. The Council was abolished in 1992. The brochure is therefore not available as a public document. Nevertheless it still circulates in many schools, largely because teachers consider it to be pedagogical and illustrative since it contains many photographs and little text. As one teacher put it: "We have nothing better". Thus, when the original edition runs out, copies are run off according to need. The second brochure is "To those of you who are immigrants in Norway – education" from the Utlendingsdirektoratet (Directorate of Immigration) - UDI 1990. It is constantly distributed and is today printed in three languages. The brochure contains 36 pages with more detailed text and 5 drawings loosely connected to the text.
- 5) The school textbook contained a photograph of a woman giving birth taken from the front and stylised drawings of the male and female sexual organs.
- 6) This picture has been removed in the latest reprint (UDI, 1994).
- 7) *An illiterate* cannot read or write in any language. *A functional illiterate* can read or write very simple language. In a Norwegian context the latter group may well be people who have a good level of proficiency in their own mother tongue. In Norway however they tackle badly all situations that demand good reading and writing skills – which in a broad sense are considered an important door-opener to cultural insight into Norway and Norwegian conditions.

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