



Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication

By John Durham Peters

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Communication plays a vital and unique role in society—often blamed for problems when it breaks down and at the same time heralded as a panacea for human relations. A sweeping history of communication, *Speaking Into the Air* illuminates our expectations of communication as both historically specific and a fundamental knot in Western thought.

"This is a most interesting and thought-provoking book. . . . Peters maintains that communication is ultimately unthinkable apart from the task of establishing a kingdom in which people can live together peacefully. Given our condition as mortals, communication remains not primarily a problem of technology, but of power, ethics and art." —Antony Anderson, *New Scientist*

"Guaranteed to alter your thinking about communication. . . . Original, erudite, and beautifully written, this book is a gem." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Peters writes to reclaim the notion of authenticity in a media-saturated world. It's this ultimate concern that renders his book a brave, colorful exploration of the hydra-headed problems presented by a rapid-fire popular culture." —*Publishers Weekly*

What we have here is a failure-to-communicate book. Funny thing is, it communicates beautifully. . . . *Speaking Into the Air* delivers what superb serious books always do—hours of intellectual challenge as one absorbs the gradually unfolding vision of an erudite, creative author." —Carlin Romano, *Philadelphia*

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- Rank: #212234 in eBooks
- Published on: 2012-04-26
- Released on: 2012-04-26
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this erudite history of an idea, Peters, a professor of communication studies at the University of Iowa, writes with good form and style in a welcome break from the jargon-muddled work of many academics who tackle the notion of communication. Following Walter Benjamin, Peters approaches the writing of history not as a linear continuum but as a simultaneity, a wormhole. What Peters is after is communication, with all its "misfires, mismatches, and skewed effects." To this end, he is just as likely to reference Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke* as he is to turn to Jesus or St. Augustine or *Phaedrus* or John Locke. The result is a cultural polylogue. Peters is bent on exposing how new media and faster modes of transportationAanything that contributes to the shrinking of the worldAaffect communication, and how their impact gives rise to increasing incommunicability. Not just literature and cultural history but also outtakes from the annals of physics, philosophy and spiritualism are important to his project. Finally, Peters writes to reclaim the notion of authenticity in a media-saturated world. It's this ultimate concern that renders his book a brave, colorful exploration of the hydra-headed problems presented by a rapid-fire popular culture. (Sept.)

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From Kirkus Reviews

Guaranteed to alter your thinking about communication. Peters (Communication Studies/Univ. of Iowa) begins this delightful essay by observing that ``Only moderns could be facing each other and be worried about 'communicating' as if they were thousands of miles apart.'' For Peters, the concept of communication has evolved in tandem with its technology, leaving us chasing a moving target rather than closing in on a fixed ideal. It appears unavoidable that human beings divide the world into ``me'' and ``not me'' in distinct ways, creating both the joy of a world populated by individual personalities and the frustration of an insuperable barrier to transfers of unmodified meaning from one person to another. Intensifying the quest for ``genuine'' communication, whether introspectively through therapy or socially through increasingly powerful forms of media, expands our expectations along with our capabilities and can produce a crisis of communication in the midst of an information age. Peters is excellent at finding novel ways to illustrate this continuing ``project of reconciling self and other.'' The range of options is presented through contrasting the interactive and selective approach of Socrates (dialogue) with the one-way and all-inclusive approach of Jesus (dissemination). The essential association of communication with existence emerges in consideration of spirits and spiritualism in everything from philosophy to sances. The scope of communicative ambition is underlined by consideration of attempts to interact with animals and aliens. In the end, Peters concludes that the fears of isolation, which have pushed us to pursue communication as the true meeting of minds, have too often overshadowed our appreciation of what is unique. Touch, the ability to come into direct contact with another being, and time, the expression of our mortality, are ``the two nonreproducible things we can share, our only guarantees of sincerity'' through which we can ``face the holiness and wretchedness of our finitude.'' Original, erudite, and beautifully written, this book is a gem. -- *Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

From the Inside Flap

Communication plays a vital and unique role in society-often blamed for problems when it breaks down and at the same time heralded as a panacea for human relations. A sweeping history of communication, *Speaking Into the Air* illuminates our expectations of communication as both historically specific and a fundamental knot in Western thought.

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