

Siblings in Cyberspace: Carey's Ritual Model of Communication in the Digital Age

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In 1975, James Carey urged us to think about communication in a ritual sense with his essay, "A Cultural Approach to Communication." In 2007, the year after Carey's death, brothers John and Hank Green—not communications scholars but a young adult novelist and a web developer, respectively—did just that. It does seem that the Internet has evolved into an increasingly ritualistic part of our lives. But the Green brothers stretched the definition of media rituals even further with *Brotherhood 2.0*: a YouTube-based project, designed with only themselves in mind, that snowballed into a global phenomenon. And while Carey was generally skeptical about technology, viewing it as a barrier to the oral tradition, *Brotherhood 2.0*—a near-perfect example of his theory of ritual communication—might just have changed his mind.

Carey's essay—republished in 1989 as the first chapter of his book, *Communication as Culture*—set up a dichotomy between communication as transmission and communication as ritual. The mainstream transmission model, Carey wrote, describes what one would most likely find in a dictionary under the entry "communication," commonly identified by "terms such as 'imparting,' 'sending,' 'transmitting,' or 'giving information to others'" (p. 15). He refined this definition as "the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control" (p. 15). By contrast, in the ritual model, "communication is linked to terms such as 'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship,' and 'the possession of a common faith'" (p. 18). The terms "ritual" and "transmission" are not meant to categorize different types of communication (e.g., news broadcast as transmission; conversation as ritual), but rather to highlight different capacities of communication. Carey illustrated his point with the classic example of a newspaper. According to the transmission model, the value of a newspaper lies in the information that it imparts. Through the lens of the ritual model, however, this information is in itself less important than the act of receiving and reading it each day, as well as the fact that it shapes and maintains our conception of the world around us. As Carey put it, a newspaper "is a

presentation of reality that gives life an overall form, order, and tone” (p. 21).

But what of digital media? Even in 2003, Nick Couldry remained ambivalent about the “long term ritual significance of the Internet” (p. 130), writing that “there is little scope as yet for ‘asynchronous *mass* communication’” (p. 131). Though Carey knew nothing of digital media at the time of writing his essay, I would argue that the same principles of transmission and ritual communication can easily be applied to the Internet and to “natively digital” artifacts—things that could not exist in any form without digital technologies. Moreover, *Brotherhood 2.0* serves as proof that the Internet *can* have long-term ritual significance.

In a nutshell, the *Brotherhood 2.0* project (of which [this video](#) is the first installment) is an attempt by John and Hank Green to fight technology with technology. Deciding that their relationship had become shallow because they primarily interacted through textual means (email, text messaging, instant messaging), they resolved to discontinue all textual communication with each other for one year. Instead, they would alternate posting daily video blogs, addressed to each other, on YouTube.

The premise, certainly, is rather ironic—using new media to simulate the old-fashioned art of face-to-face interaction—and has interesting, uniquely digital consequences—the opening of a private sibling relationship to thousands of strangers, for instance. It also embodies several facets of the idea of the “natively digital” artifact. Previously, a person could film himself, send the tape to his brother, and wait for a response, but this mode of communication would have been slow, expensive, and entirely impractical. The YouTube medium also encourages a kind of audience interaction that is not possible in traditional mass media. For example, in the January 1 video, Hank mentions “punishments” that will be doled out if one of the brothers fails to post his video on time (see Appendix A). When they are necessary, these punishments are suggested by viewers in the comments.

Brotherhood 2.0 epitomizes, and even extends, Carey’s theory of ritual communication. Just as Carey (1989) argued that the important part of a newspaper is not the actual news but the fact that it is delivered every day, the important part of these videos is often not their content. In the January 1 video, Hank Green spends a little bit of his time explaining the project, but much of the video is taken up with his trivial antics (“I can see my eye in my eye.”) and musings (“Does that make us crazy?”). *What* he is saying is of little significance, but the fact that his brother will be seeing his face every other day (and vice versa) holds a great deal of value in terms of their long-distance fraternal bond.

The transmission theory still applies. Especially in later videos, the “[vlogbrothers](#)” (John and Hank’s YouTube username, by which they are often identified) devote a good portion of their daily screen time to explanations and discussions of culture and politics. Although the messages are bite-sized (each video is usually three to four minutes long),

they are still important. Even more important, however, is their ritual significance in creating and maintaining a certain worldview: the fact that the brothers are talking about a certain topic means that, if you are one of their regular viewers, it has become part of your reality and is something you should care about. This underscores an important point: although the project began as a ritual for just two people, John and Hank were aware at the outset that their videos were available for public viewing. Since this video was posted, they have gained a fan base of over 500,000 “subscribers,” a number that grows every day. YouTube notifies the subscribers the instant one of the brothers uploads a new video. Thus, Brotherhood 2.0 has become a ritual for the huge number of people who watch the videos on the same schedule as they are made. Interestingly, the subscription function is not unique to YouTube but is almost universal, in one form or another on sites across the Web (“following” on Twitter is one example). By adding the “subscribe” feature, the medium inherently supports ritualization.

Carey (1989) wrote that, “under a ritual view, then, news is not information but drama” (p. 21). In this case, the “news” becomes Hank and John’s daily thoughts. And it certainly is drama. If we backtrack to the idea of the private relationship on public display (a phenomenon that all too commonly manifests itself via Facebook), we can also tie in the fact that Hank seems to be acting for us. In theory, we are looking into a window on his life, but we are not receiving a mirror of reality, because Hank acts differently when his camera is turned on than he probably would otherwise. This is analogous to Carey’s (1989) observation that news “is not pure information but a portrayal” of the world (p. 20). And if, as Carey claimed, media “invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it” (p. 21), the viewer in this case assumes his role to be that of Hank’s friend. “hank, you were by far the most awkward video blogger ive ever seen. EVER. good thing you got so good lol,” a commenter known as [SuperWRASSLER](#) wrote of the first video, years after the video was made. The commenter addresses Hank directly and casually, as if he were an old friend.

Thousands of people have likewise assumed such a relationship, because there is another dimension to this project—Brotherhood 2.0 spawned a huge online movement of viewers of the vlogbrothers’ videos who call themselves “[Nerdfighters](#)” (fighting *for* nerds, not against them). They embrace the intellectual, “nerdy” culture promoted by John and Hank’s videos and have their own set of sayings and [inside jokes](#) that nearly constitute a unique language. To name just a couple: “DFTBA” stands for “don’t forget to be awesome” and “in your pants” are three words that provide amusement when added to the ends of book titles—as John demonstrated in one of his [videos](#)—as well as the inspiration for the name of the online forum where Nerdfighters could communicate with one another. Some Nerdfighters have begun making their own YouTube

videos; others use the community to organize events and raise money for charitable causes.

Most fascinating of all is the concept of “Nerdfighteria”—the virtual realm inhabited by the Nerdfighters. Carey (1989) wrote that “we first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up residence in the world we have produced” (p. 30). But Nerdfighteria takes his theory to an extent that he probably could not have imagined. Nerdfighters have a distinctive common culture of symbols—these consist of John and Hank themselves, their videos and the videos of other prominent Nerdfighters, a plethora of inside jokes, and certain current events and issues that are often discussed in the videos. Once these symbols were established, Nerdfighters “took up residence” in this virtual culture, naming it Nerdfighteria. But they went a step further. They organized “Nerdfighter gatherings,” some so large that they verged on conventions. They met each other in person. Some of them became friends. With so many Nerdfighters in a single physical space, that space temporarily became “Nerdfighteria.” Essentially, they took a community that was entirely virtual and conceptual, and they brought it into the real world.

The project has come full circle: it began with John and Hank Green, who have known each other their entire lives, trying to replicate the most basic form of human communication (face-to-face conversation). It ended up with thousands of people, who had met and formed connections with each other solely online, returning to this basic type of interaction. Brotherhood 2.0 shaped reality in more than just an ideological way—it shaped it in a physical way too.

Carey’s ritual model of communication, therefore, can describe digital media with almost uncanny accuracy. His assertion that “communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (Carey, 1989, p. 23) can be broken down in terms of Brotherhood 2.0: the two brothers produce the reality that consists of their ideas and their daily back-and-forth ritual, but the community of fans (Nerdfighters) maintains that reality by acknowledging it and talking about it with each other.

At this point, the original intent behind Carey’s words diverges from the actuality of this digital artifact. When Carey (1989) wrote about repairing reality (p. 30), he meant that people can repurpose the ideas of others to fit their own needs and eras. The original authors of the theories, in most cases, would not be aware that their ideas were being repurposed. But, in the case of Brotherhood 2.0, the situation is more dynamic. John and Hank are the “rulers” of Nerdfighteria and the authors of its original tenets and ideas. As such, they lay down the foundation—produce the “publicly available stock of symbols” (p. 28), as Carey (1989) would put it, of Nerdfighteria. But when Nerdfighters then converse about these symbols, John and Hank are in on the conversation, because it is a conversation that takes place in YouTube videos and on public message boards. Thus, they can address this conversation in their videos,

essentially “repairing” reality, either by modifying their opinions based on something the Nerdfighters say, or by defending their opinions against the opinions of the Nerdfighters. This back-and-forth between media producer and consumer (and even here, the line is blurry) supports Carey’s (1989) suggestion that “thought is predominantly public and social” (p. 28) and pushes it further, eliminating the need for the thinkers in question to be proximate to one another.

Finally, the Nerdfighters, with the help of John and Hank, transform reality by bringing Nerdfighteria into the physical world. So although they are “constructing a model of an environment and then running the model faster than the environment to see if nature can be coerced to perform as the model does” (Carey, 1989, p. 28), it’s a transformation that comes about not by coercion but almost organically. John and Hank did not set out to build a model for social interactions among thousands of people and then test that model—Nerdfighteria simply developed that way through social, collaborative thinking.

After John and Hank’s experimental “year without textual communication” had ended, they decided to continue making videos, mostly to keep their community of viewers alive. Therefore, when Carey (1989) said that “a ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (p. 18), it’s difficult to come up with a more apt example than *Brotherhood 2.0* and Nerdfighteria.

What, then, would Carey think of the vlogbrothers? Carolyn Marvin (1990), in an essay advocating the application of Carey’s ritual model to technology in a broad sense, perceived an implied split in Carey’s writing between “good-communication and bad-technology” (p. 217). She went so far as to say that “his positioning of mass media and transportation as high-tech destroyers of community makes him a cultural positivist for whom transmissive technology is what is not original oral communication” (p. 220). But in an essay responding to Marvin, Carey (1990) countered that he believes “technology is thoroughly cultural from the outset” (p. 245). In one sense, Carey acknowledged that technology is “a creation and therefore an expression of human purposes” (p. 245), indicating that he does not see technology as inherently detrimental. But he was clearly not without his qualms about technological progress. “I believe,” he wrote, “that the technological reorganization of life in the modern world involves genuine gains and losses, and such losses are abbreviated in phrases like the ‘loss of community’ and the ‘decay of democracy.’ It is not that we lost something we once had but that we have been robbed by the illusion that we will ever have it” (p. 249).

The problem with communication (and technology by extension), Carey (1989) wrote in “A Cultural Approach to Communication,” is that we view it primarily as a means of power and trade, of politics and economics, instead of an opportunity “to expand people’s powers to learn

and exchange ideas and experience” (p. 34). Carey (1989) seemed keenly aware of a fault in modern systems of communication, calling us to “rebuild a model of and for communication of some restorative value in shaping our common culture” (p. 35). Still, he failed to propose anything resembling a concrete solution, instead seeming to want to fall back on the old values of oral tradition. “The point is not to eliminate technology (no one wants that),” he offered, “but to contain or balance off its bias via an alternative principle and form of communication. The plea for time, for the oral tradition, for virtue is certainly a slim reed on which to hang much hope” (Carey, 1990, pp. 250-251).

Carey’s defeatist attitude seemed to spring from his conviction that technology is an inhibitor, rather than a facilitator, of the kind of communication he wished to achieve. Unable to find a solution by pushing technology away, perhaps he should have turned towards it. In fact, many of his goals—“to learn and exchange ideas and experience,” “shaping our common culture”—ring true as the pillars upon which Brotherhood 2.0 developed.

John and Hank’s digital relationship is a return to the oral tradition that Carey so revered—they are just two brothers sharing stories, jokes, and ideas. It is a relationship where rituals are made possible by technology, rather than hindered by it. Brotherhood 2.0 not only brought people together under a common culture, but encouraged the exchange of thoughts among thousands of people—a constantly-evolving brainstorm on a massive level. John and Hank Green might have found something that Carey was looking for all along.

Certain critiques of the system the Greens developed can be anticipated, and it is true that no technology is without its drawbacks. For one, Nerdfighteria is a world accessible only to the Internet-capable. I believe, however—and I think Carey would agree—that it is the people waterlogged with technology who are most in need of a new ritual model of communication. Another concern is that the sheer volume of discourse generated by the project is so enormous as to be overwhelming. Still, the model works because John and Hank serve as moderators. If you do not have the time or will to venture into the forums, you can still be part of the community by watching the brothers’ videos, where they will give updates about the goings-on in Nerdfighteria, distilling the ideas generated in the aforementioned brainstorm into highlights that they find intriguing.

Despite the vastly positive aspects of this social and intellectual community, Carey (1990) might still have balked at the technological medium, seeing this as yet another unsuccessful “attempt to escape the constraints of the proximate” (p. 249). He might view computer screens as a sterilizing force, prohibiting us from truly engaging in the oral tradition. But there is nothing sterilizing about the knowledge that there are people out there, like long-lost relatives, who are friends that you have not yet met—nothing distancing about the sheer delight in your voice when you see someone in a coffee shop wearing a [shirt](#) emblazoned with John

Green's face and the word [PIZZA](#) (proof that the stock of common cultural symbols transcends the Internet) and say, "You're a Nerdfighter? I am too!" In a community born of distance, proximity is celebrated.

So is Brotherhood 2.0 the future of communication? Could the project be copied, creating communities to fill different niches of the digital world? Perhaps not, if only because it developed under circumstances that are not precisely replicable. The fact that John and Hank reached out to self-identified "nerds," people who stereotypically gravitate to the Internet, could partially account for their success. Moreover, as an author for teenagers, John had already gained a fan base for his books. Many of these people probably followed him to Brotherhood 2.0 via a quick Google search of his name, and they account largely for the age demographic of Nerdfighteria. Additionally, one [video](#)—in which Hank performs an original song about the then-upcoming release of the *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* book—went viral, prompting an unforeseen influx of viewers ("Accio Deathly Hallows" has been viewed over a million times on YouTube).

Even if the Brotherhood 2.0 model is never precisely duplicated, it does serve to illustrate the vast potential of digital media to create communities, and it answers some of the concerns Carey identified about the state of modern communication. The project has taught us that the Internet can facilitate dialogue in a ritualistic way that brings back some of the positive aspects of the oral tradition and transforms them, so that people across the globe can join the conversation. In the Green brothers' original drive to become more connected, they ended up connecting many others. And because of the momentum gained from a greater number of people producing and spreading ideas together, Carey's theory of ritual communication has reached new heights. If the digital generation takes a page from the vlogbrothers' book, perhaps the oral tradition can live on—not in spite of the Internet, but because of it.

Appendix: Video Transcript for “Brotherhood 2.0: January 1st”

Intro Titles:

Two Brothers, One Video Blog

365 Days of Textless Communication

It’s a whole new kind of Brotherhood.

Brotherhood 2.0

Hank Green: Hey John. I guess you’ve heard by now—

[camera beeps]

Hank Green: Auto power off? What the—still some glitches to work out.

Hank Green: Hello, John. By now you will have received my message that we will no longer be communicating through any textual means. No more instant messaging; no more emailing. Only video blogging. And possibly phone calls.

Hank Green: You can see my eye in my eye. Ahhhh.

Hank Green: Okay, let’s try to ignore that. There. You can’t see it now, can you?

Hank Green: Last night I sent you an email from a New Year’s Eve party in Lake Tahoe.

[video footage of party begins; Gnarl’s Barkley’s “Crazy” is playing in the background]

Hank Green (voiceover): The email outlined our plans. Starting on January 1st—today—I will send you a video blog. Tomorrow, you will reply to that video blog. We will continue like this until the year is up. If one of us fails to send a video blog on a weekday, there will be certain punishments. The punishments will be outlined later. I finished this email, “Cross my heart, hope to die, and I may very possibly be required to stick a needle in my eye.” That’s the kind of punishment I’m talking about. Brotherhood 2.0 commences today. Does that make us crazy? Probably.

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