

# 2021 Theme Narrative: *Communication in History: The Key to Understanding*

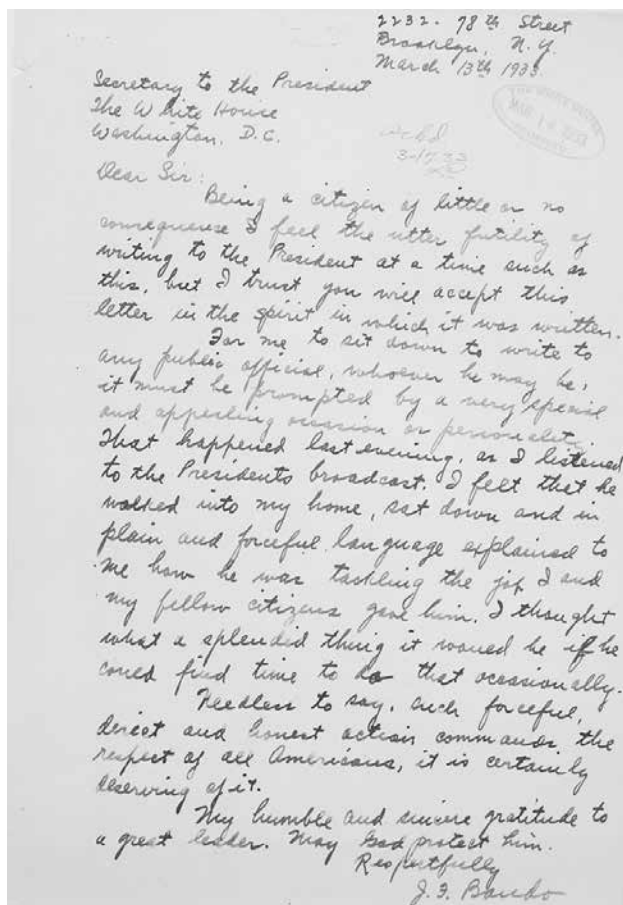
ASHLEY FOLEY DABBRACCIO, Program Assistant, National History Day®

During the 2020-2021 academic year, National History Day (NHD) students will explore topics relating to the theme *Communication in History: The Key to Understanding*. This theme asks students to consider how people exchange information and interact with each other. Students have the chance to explore how the methods and modes of communication have changed over time, and how they have shaped the present. Major inventions like the telephone, the telegraph, and the television stand out in our minds as obvious examples of how communication has changed over time. Yet, communication is more than just these inventions. It is about how words, thoughts, or ideas are exchanged throughout history.

## THE ACT OF COMMUNICATION

Merriam-Webster defines communication as “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior.” History is filled with stories about people, groups, or nations either communicating or failing to communicate with each other. Before we can understand these stories, we must go beyond common definitions of communication and recognize the many ways people communicate. Only then can we begin to investigate the impact communication has had on social and political changes throughout history.

Let us look at written communication. Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 1400s, making it easier to mass-produce the written word. Before that, manuscripts had been written by hand and were only available to the elite. How did the mass production of books and other printed materials help to shape society? Or, consider telecommunication. Students interested in global history might look to the spread of telecommunication lines across the globe. For instance, the development of Australia’s first international telecommunication system linked them to Asia in 1872. How did this development shape international diplomacy?



J. F. Bando’s November 13, 1933, letter to the Secretary of the President revealed that President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fireside chats connected him to the American people on a very personal level. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration (198124).

Students can also research the importance of the radio in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. The radio provided a more accessible and less expensive way to get updates on popular culture, weather, and daily news. Some students might examine the radio’s role in promoting jazz in

the 1920s. Others might explore President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's fireside chats. How did President Roosevelt use the radio to communicate with the American people? Why was it important that he did so?

Conventions, exhibitions, movements, and other public gatherings help people communicate ideas and opinions with each other. For instance, World's Fairs (also known as World Expositions), in which nations showed off their most recent advancements, exploded in the 1800s. Visitors came from all over the world. Why might countries want to communicate their achievements? What specific ideas and information did the nations show the world, and why might that be important?



The 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri, featured a Palace of Electricity meant to showcase the United States' achievements in commercializing electricity. Courtesy of the Hornbake Library, University of Maryland.

Another example is the use of conventions by social activists to speak out on topics like abolition, woman suffrage, temperance, and other social reforms. The Declaration of Sentiments address given at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention revealed that suffragists wanted equality and voting rights. How did the suffragists shape their arguments? Was the message they conveyed well-received, or did it lead to a broader discussion? Other students might look to Steve Biko's speeches and his time with South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s. How did he communicate his demand for an end to apartheid and social unrest in South Africa?

Language is a key way we communicate with each other. Immigrants to the United States often lived and worked in communities alongside others who spoke their native language. Why might they have chosen to do so? Did their language barrier make it harder for immigrants to communicate effectively and adjust to life in the United States?

What restrictions have been placed on language in the past? Students might explore the ban on the native Hawaiian language following the overthrow of Queen

Lili'uokalani in 1893. Why was the Hawaiian language banned? Did that action change the way native Hawaiians communicated with each other?



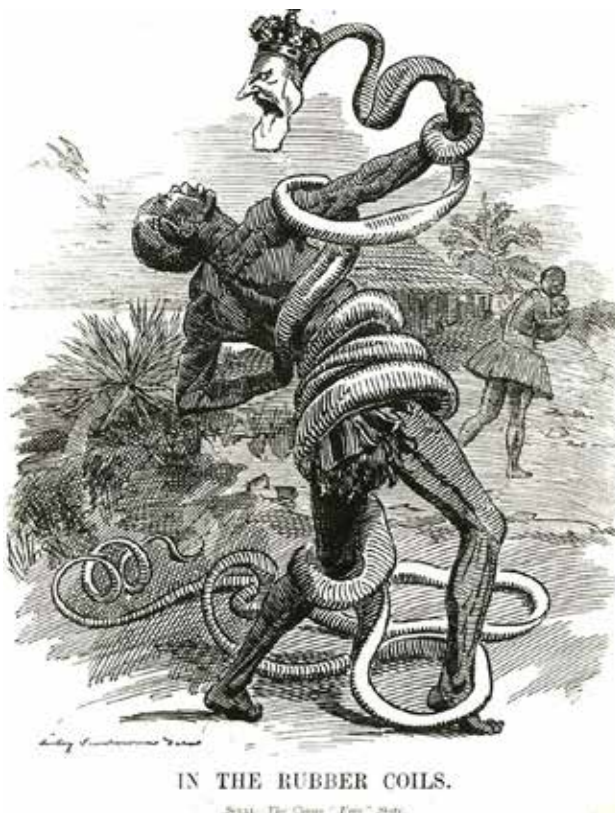
The December 1893 cover of *Judge* magazine featured a caricature of Queen Lili'uokalani being dethroned by armed American soldiers. The artist's aggressive imagery and the phrase "We draw the line at this" presented the event as a hostile takeover by the U.S. government. Courtesy of HathiTrust & Digital Library (18811939).

Language does not always involve the physical act of speaking. Developed in the early nineteenth century, American Sign Language (ASL) helped deaf individuals communicate. What barriers did hearing-impaired individuals experience before the use of ASL? Similarly, the written language of Braille has helped the blind community communicate. Who invented it, and why? Did it break barriers or create more challenges?

On a more personal level, students might explore letter writing. How were letters used as a means of communication? What did people write about in letters? Did they write to the government, family, or friends? How does the tone change based on the recipient or the topic? Students might explore letters written by women during the American Civil War and investigate what they wrote about. What was the purpose of the letters? To whom did they send these letters? Why did they feel the need to voice their thoughts during the American Civil War? Others might

explore open letters like the one written by Émile Zola to protest the Dreyfus Affair in France (1894-1906). What consequences did Zola face? How did the event affect the country of France?

Images and imagery, too, can communicate thoughts, opinions, or ideas. Portraits, photographs, and art convey meaning. Students might look to the cave paintings of earlier societies or the hieroglyphs and drawings created by Ancient Egyptians. What do those images convey about their society? Do they communicate what was deemed to be important whether it be about family, war, or society in general? Other examples might include satirical materials from England's *Punch* weekly magazine. In 1906, *Punch* ran "In the Rubber Coils," a political cartoon that depicted Belgium's King Leopold II as a rubber vine coiled around a Congolese man. What is the image trying to convey to the reader about the relationship between Europe and Africa? How do images communicate people's opinions on important political and social topics? How did political cartoons sway public opinion about support for anti-imperialism measures?



The 1906 political cartoon from *Punch* magazine highlighted social unrest around European imperialization of Africa. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Students might also look at other key ways imagery has communicated opinions or feelings. The invention of the television changed how we communicate and learn about different events. The Vietnam War (1955-1975) divided American public opinion for over 20 years. How was press coverage of the Vietnam War different from that of previous wars? What images of the war did Americans see daily on their television screens? How did photographs and film footage inspire anti-war protests in the United States and abroad? Other students might compare and contrast the footage of the 1968 Democratic and Republican Conventions. How did those broadcasts influence the vote? What was the overall impact on Republican Richard Nixon's victory over Democratic Vice President Hubert Humphrey?

## THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING

Communication, in and of itself, is defined by the exchange of ideas, news, or information. Yet, there is another side to communication. Do we *understand* what is told to us? American journalist Sydney J. Harris wrote, "The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through."<sup>1</sup> Information is extremely important, but if we fail to get our point across or miscommunicate the information, it often leads to unintended results.

What happens when we do not understand the intended message? How has miscommunication or failure to communicate shaped history? History is riddled with examples of miscommunication that resulted in unwanted consequences. The events at Wounded Knee (1890) between Native Americans engaging in their ancestral ghost dance and U.S. soldiers led to a violent encounter between the two groups. Why? Did both sides understand what the other was doing, or did a lack of understanding lead to violence and chaos?

What happens when miscommunication occurs during war? Students might explore the events of the now-infamous Charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimean War (1853-1856). How did miscommunication affect the battle? What were the consequences of such miscommunication?

Another example of misinformation is the 1898 Spanish-American War. Misinformation and miscommunication led many Americans to blame Spain for the explosion onboard the USS *Maine* in Havana Harbor. Newspapers ran wild stories about the event. Why did they choose to blame Spain? Why publish such a sensational story? What effect did this story have?

Miscommunication and misinformation can turn countries against each other or turn friends into enemies. Take, for instance, the Bosnian War (1992-1995), which turned

<sup>1</sup> Sydney J. Harris was an American journalist for the *The Chicago Daily News* and *The Chicago Sun-Times* until his death in 1986. His column, "Strictly Personal," was syndicated in over 200 newspapers throughout the United States.



Serbians against their Bosnian and Croatian neighbors. What was communicated? Why? What consequences arose as a result? How did Slobodan Milošević's fiery rhetoric cause such miscommunication between the nations? How did it affect friends, family, and neighbors who found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict?

## CONCLUSION

The act of communicating with other people, communities, or nations is often taken for granted. Yet, communication and our ability to understand what is being conveyed is a much more complicated story. In order to understand the role communication plays in history, students will have to understand the historical context of what is being talked about during the period. All communication happens as part of a larger story. In order to understand, we need to know what is motivating people to talk, write, and communicate with each other in the first place.

While this narrative provides examples to help students think about different topics, many more can be found in museums, archives, and related organizations that support NHD student research. Learn more about these NHD partner resources at [nhd.org/partner-resources](https://nhd.org/partner-resources).

To access more theme resources, go to [nhd.org/themebook](https://nhd.org/themebook).

# Know The Rules!



## Same Contest, New Rules

NHD's new contest rules for 2021 launch  
Monday, June 22, 2020.

Visit

<https://www.nhd.org/rulebook>  
to review the new rules.

# RULES