Theories and Models of Communication: Foundations and Heritage

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Abstract

This chapter charts the historical influences on the theories and models that shaped the communication discipline. This chapter illustrates the importance of U.S. and European scholars from not only the beginnings of the communication discipline, but those who were pre-eminent in other academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, political science and journalism, as well as examining emerging scholarship from Asia that focuses on understanding cultural differences through communication theories. The chapter traces the foundations and heritage of the communication from five perspectives: (1) communication as shaper of public opinion; (2) communication as language use; (3) communication as information transmission; (4) communication as developer of relationships; and (5) communication as definer, interpreter, and critic of culture.

Key words: public opinion, media messages, Agenda Setting Theory, Cultivation Theory, language, cultural studies, rhetoric, General Semantics, symbolic interactionism, relational communication, information, uncertainty
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Communication study seems inherently multi-disciplinary, drawing theory and sharing concepts from psychology, sociology, political science and other social sciences. Indeed, many of the scholars that are considered pre-eminent in communication were not from the discipline of communication itself and that their work shaped communication theory was a by-product and not the original intent of their work (Delia, 1987; Rogers, 1994).

Communication has deep roots as an area of inquiry, but its history as an academic discipline is relatively brief. The most comprehensive ancient texts on communication to which we have access are those of the Greek and Roman societies. In both societies, communication is defined as synonymous with rhetoric, though that term was contested between Plato and Aristotle. Plato, according to Peters’ (1999) analysis, defined rhetoric as fostering the ability for humans to connect as *eros*, or at a soulful level through stylish and poetic language, while Aristotle’s ideas about rhetoric are generally seen as explaining how humans influence each other ethically in public *fora*. Aristotle’s ideas were oftentimes seen as cornerstones of democratic deliberation, while Plato’s ideas provided a foundation for the study of literature. The differences between them were sometimes simplified to style (“mere rhetoric”) vs. substance (rhetoric as an ancient and noble art). Nevertheless, major philosophers tended to write about rhetoric at least in passing. Rhetoric evolved distinctly from communication for at least half of the 20th Century, but eventually the two areas of study came to rival each other.

Communication’s history is also somewhat contentious, as a communication disciplinary story starts with sociology and social psychology and then co-mingles with the study of
journalism and speech before emerging as the dominant force in the stories of both of the latter (Eadie, in press). The study of communication developed primarily in the United States, though with considerable influence from European thinkers. In this chapter, we will trace some of the historical influences on contemporary thought in the communication discipline. In doing so, we will draw on the influence of U. S. and European scholars on the development of our ideas about communication phenomena, and we will touch on some emerging scholarship from Asia that shows potential for understanding cultural differences through communication ideas.

In structuring this chapter, we need to take into account differing ideas about the nature of communication. So, we will organize our survey around five broad categories of communication phenomena: (1) communication as shaper of public opinion; (2) communication as language use; (3) communication as information transmission; (4) communication as developer of relationships; and (5) communication as definer, interpreter, and critic of culture.

Communication as Shaper of Public Opinion

Communication’s roots in the formation of public opinion stem from the development of sociology as a discipline, primarily at the University of Chicago. Deliberately located in the midst of a working class urban neighborhood, the university took as its mission the study of its surroundings as a laboratory for societal improvement. Robert Park, the head of the nascent program that would come to define the university’s mission, recognized early the role that communication technology could play in society. Park’s theories of mass communication (1922, 1952) became the basis for his colleagues to begin to think, from a variety of perspectives,
about how a variety of communication phenomena interacted with the formation and maintenance of society.

It was a journalist who brought the idea of public opinion into focus, however. Newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann chose to write for public, rather than scholarly consumption, but the thorough and eloquent manner in which he expressed his ideas led scholars to value his work. Lippmann’s (1922) book, *Public Opinion*, became a touchstone for scholarly work for many years to come.

Following World War I, concern arose in particular about the role of propaganda in shaping public opinion. Political scientist Harold Lasswell (1927) became an early advocate for studying how media could be used, particularly by governments, to influence public opinion through biased or incomplete messages. Media were looked on as powerful forces that could potentially affect large numbers of people in similar ways. The wide-spread panic that set in following the Halloween radio broadcast of H. G. Wells’ story, “The War of the Worlds,” was seen as an example of the power of media to act as a “hypodermic needle” (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Pooley, 2006; Rogers, 1994), injecting a powerful drug into the public consciousness.

Concern about the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe led to the first concerted research efforts in both mediated and face-to-face communication, in the 1930s. Interestingly, many of the scholars who participated in these efforts were European émigrés who sought to escape those political movements. As outsiders (and Jews, who suffered under anti-Semitic attitudes then prevalent at major U. S. universities) these scholars found ways of supporting themselves by doing practical research on problems deemed to be of great interest either to U.
S. corporations or to the government. From this research, which eventually was identified with social psychology, came a tradition of quantitative study of communication behavior.

During World War II, the U. S. government gathered scholars together in Washington, D. C., to provide collective brainpower for managing the war effort and the sacrifices that were necessary at home. Research on propaganda and public opinion had already been underway in the 1920s and 1930s, and Paul Lazarsfeld and his associates’ (1944) study of the 1940 election (see below for details) had debunked the idea that mass media messages had direct effects on voting behavior. Rather, these effects were often modulated by pre-existing attitudes, such as political party allegiances, and by interactions with influential people (who were labeled “opinion leaders”). Research conducted on group interaction as a tool of persuasion (e.g., Lewin, 1943) demonstrated that commonly-held attitudes could be modified if “good of the whole” pressures were applied. All in all, research efforts during World War II set the stage for an explosion of communication study in the years following the end of the war.

Lazarsfeld and the Office of Radio Research studied how political advertisements during the presidential campaign of 1940 affected voters in Erie County, Ohio. This study according to Lazarsfeld (1969) was not originally intended to study voting habits, but instead to test "a program of the Department of Agriculture, since its innovations made major changes in American behavior and ... this Department ... developed the most extensive use of the radio in support of its policies" (p. 330).

The Erie County study examined the changes in voters' opinions over a period of several months, expecting to find that the media messages they were exposed to had a direct effect on
their voting behavior. Instead of showing a direct effect, however, the analysis of the results showed that voting decisions were completely unrelated to the messages they had heard (Barton, 2001; Jeřábek 2001; Rogers, 1994). These findings completely contradicted the prevailing thought of the day. The study further showed that opinion leaders developed their ideas through a variety of sources that included the media, and then influenced the members of their community through their social interactions. The voters who Lazarsfeld interviewed inevitably pointed to these influential individuals as the source of their information and the main influence on their voting decisions. This finding led Lazarsfeld to propose that there was another level of communication other than the media (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995), a process he called the two-step flow of communication.

After Lazarsfeld’s large-scale case study demonstrated that media messages played only a small role in directly influencing election results, research in this area for a number of years focused on conditions where media messages would play more or less of a role than face-to-face influence in the formation of public opinion. It would not be until McCombs and Shaw (1972) produced data causing the re-thinking of the small-effects paradigm that research would shift to what these authors dubbed “the agenda-setting function of media.” This function links press coverage with public ratings of importance with issues, and a study of the 1968 U. S. presidential election found a high correlation between these two items, given a three-week lag time. While these findings did not negate Lazarsfeld’s idea of two-step flow, they identified for the first time a powerful direct effect for media messages on public opinion. Rather than
persuade people or tell them what to think, argued the researchers, media tell them what is
important to think about.

A companion theory, Cultivation (Gerbner, 1973), argued that large effects from media
could be generated based on the amount of time spent consuming media. Heavy users of
media tended to distort perceptions of society to fit with media content to a far greater extent
than did light users. For example, individuals who heavily consume news and news analysis
from a particular point of view (e.g., in the U. S., Fox News or MSNBC) will be likely to distort
news events to a greater extent than those who spent little to no time consuming content from
these stations. While Cultivation Theory had uses outside of public opinion research, it, too,
was a crack in the formulation that media had but small effects on public opinion.

In later developments, agenda-setting theorists demonstrated that media messages also
had the capability to influence how individuals think about topics. In particular, these theorists
developed the concepts of “framing” and “priming” to describe this process. Framing refers to
the means by which media messages are presented. Frames provide salience for particular
aspects of the message that have been selected by its creator to shape it from a perspective
(Entman, 1993). So, a news story about a crime can be framed from the perspectives of the
victim, the perpetrator, or the investigating police officer and the same details can yield
different impressions of the event. Priming, on the other hand, relates to how media messages
are constructed to indicate to audiences what elements are important to use in judging the
value of an object. To provide an example, a news analysis is priming its readers when its
author states that performance on maintaining a healthy national economy is the most
important element for forming judgments about the performance of U. S. presidents when they run for re-election. Such an analysis may cause its readers to overlook other measures of presidential performance and focus only on economic viability. President Ronald Reagan, who was a master of priming rhetoric, famously asked American voters whether they were better off than four years previously as a cornerstone of his campaign for a second term. Americans agreed overwhelmingly that they were and returned Mr. Reagan to office in a landslide vote.

The study of communication as a shaper of public opinion has focused primarily on means by which media messages influence the public’s perceptions of issues and events. Research on how mediated and face-to-face communication combine to change behavior has combined public opinion research with other communication phenomena to produce promising means for promoting individual and social good. These models have been used primarily to create campaigns for the betterment of individual and public health (e.g., Cappella, 2006; Donohew, Lorch & Palmgreen, 1998).

Communication as Language Use

The turn of the 20th Century brought with it not only the discovery of stimulus and response as a direct cause of behavior but also an interest in philosophical quarters in how language is constructed and used. Early 20th century interest in language use developed in both Europe and in the U.S. The study of language represented the variety of interests of the day, including interest in the nature of reality and the relationship of language to culture.

For example, Ferdinand de Saussure, working in Europe and Charles Sanders Peirce, working in the U. S., formulated the theory of semiotics. Saussure was a professor of linguistics
at the University of Geneva in the early part of the 20th century. He posited that linguistics was part of a then unheard of science called semiology or semiotics, both derived "from the Greek word *semeion*, which means sign, and they both refer to the study of how signs communicate meanings" (Bignell, 2000, p. 5). In semiotics theory, Saussure argued that language is made up of linguistic signs that join a concept and a sound image. He called the concept the signified and the sound image the signifier and the combination of the two, a sign. The sign, Saussure (1916/2000) wrote, is seen as a psychological construct. The nature of the linguistic sign has a number of distinct properties which include immutability, mutability and arbitrariness.

Another approach to semiotics was undertaken by Saussure's intellectual protégé Roland Barthes. In many ways Barthes followed Saussure in noting the dual function of communication, especially language. In Barthes’ volume, *Mythologies* (1957), the overarching theme is that the majority of experiences a person has at a social or personal level begin with language--identity, features of experience, narrative, communication with others, and so on. But linguistic behavior as a structure of experience derives far less from personal exchange than with how language is conveyed to the personal level from the public level, where lies the locus of social control, including control over language itself (Barthes, 2000).

In fact, according to Barthes, language that makes the most social meaning (allegedly) is not necessarily clear but is rather deliberately ambiguous or deceptive in some way. Thus language, as an attribute of culture, "lends itself to myth," only rarely "impos[ing] at the outset a full meaning which it is impossible to distort" (Barthes, 2000, p. 132). Language may be unclear in a variety of ways, either because it is poetic or because it works by analogy. The real
idea is that language "lends itself to multiple contingencies" (p. 132). Semio-logs function to engage in this interpretive act, and it is up to the reader of myths to reveal their necessary function. That is because "in a language, the sign is arbitrary: nothing compels the acoustic image tree 'naturally' to mean the concept tree" (p. 126). Nothing, Barthes posited, except the motives of those who conveyed the notion of tree.

Where language use is intent on signifying a cultural meaning there is undoubtedly intent to affect the psychological experience of that meaning (Barthes, 2000). Motivation, Barthes argued, is essential "to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form, there is no myth without motivated form" (p. 126). Barthes cited the innumerable images that the media use to convey a social message, to imply, without directly pronouncing the superiority of a Eurocentric worldview. The communicated image conforms to what Barthes termed the "very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature . . . [and] is not read as a motive, but as a reason" (p. 129). In due course, values get conveyed with the authority of facts, all in the service of social control. Only when the receivers that would be recognized decoders of language themselves produce language is social control likely to shift. Thus, the "bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth" (p. 146).

Interest in language use by Vygotsky (1971: originally published in 1934) and Ayer (1936) drew upon logical positivism and empiricism as a means of explaining the relationship of language to reality. Vygotsky saw language development as a function of experience with one’s environment, using language to associate objects with thoughts and feelings. Ayer proposed
the use of language as a means of verifying the logic of one’s environment. Language in itself is not verifiable, but it can be used to understand what may be verified empirically.

A desire for empirical verification also pervaded the development of General Semantics, which started out as a theory of language use and became more a philosophy of communication than anything else. Begun by a Polish engineer named Alfred Korzybski (1933) and popularized in the U. S. by S. I. Hayakawa (1941), General Semantics began with the observation that language was not a logical system and ended by advocating for a series of devices designed to make communication based on language that was concrete, as opposed to abstract. General Semanticists envisioned a communication system with as little ambiguity as possible so as to promote understanding and thereby reduce conflict, particularly conflict between nations. The proposed system was based on a set of tools that would continually remind language users to aim for the lowest possible level of abstraction in both speech and writing.

Pierce’s work on the philosophical movement known as pragmatism (c. f., 1878) influenced a number of U. S. scholars interested in language use. Among those were John Dewey, whose book, How We Think (1910), became the basis for teaching generations of students the basics of collective decision-making, and George Herbert Mead, whose book, Mind, Self, and Society (1934, a posthumous rendering of his theory, based on lecture notes and working papers) became a basis for understanding how individuals interact with society through the use of signs and symbols. Mead and Dewey were colleagues at the University of Chicago for a time, and their interactions with each other and with colleagues were
instrumental in developing the perspective that became known as the Chicago School of Sociology.

Communication scholars eventually pursued with gusto Mead’s ideas about what was eventually called symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism held that individual behavior was a function of the repertoire of roles available to an individual, as well as how that person diagnosed what role might be appropriate for a particular situation. Hart and Burks’ (1972) concept of rhetorical sensitivity provided an early example of the influence of symbolic interactionism in communication study, as these authors combined rhetorical message-generation principles with symbolic interaction’s emphasis on role-taking and adaptation. Eventually, symbolic interactionism gave way to social construction, as communication scholars adapted the work of psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1992, 1999) for use in communication research.

Kenneth Burke was another sociologist with big ideas, ones that would prove to be highly influential in understanding of the rhetorical aspects of language use. Burke described language as a tool used by people to communicate and rationalize at a far deeper level than could be done by mere language itself. Burke focused on the symbols people created to name things in his understanding of language. According to Holland (1955) when rhetoricians analyzed speeches, they tended to look at three aspects -- what was said, why it was said and how it was said. Burke however, would argue that Holland’s formulation did not go far enough and that a primary goal of criticism was to use "all [language instruments] that there is to use"
(Burke, 1941, p. 23). For Burke, speeches were only one aspect of language instruments and he argued that a rhetorician should not limit themselves to spoken text.

Burke proposed the Dramatist Pentad Theory, which analyzes events through five essential elements: "what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (Burke 1945, p. xv). He adapted his terms of analysis from the theatre in order to account for motivation, which he took to be a decisive category for the explanation of rhetorical events. Burke held that language is created hierarchically, that it reinforces hierarchies, and that humans cling to hierarchies to bring order to their lives through symbolic actions. Language for Burke is always layered with emotion. Every word is layered with judgment, attitude and feelings, and Burke further argued that because of this complexity, language functions either to bring people together or to separate them. When people identify with the language and symbols that a speaker is using, this bringing-together process creates what Burke called, "consubstantiality." Like many scholars of language use, Burke’s influence crossed disciplines. Communication scholars poring over Burke’s work continue to find insights that reveal how language use not only communicates but can also influence communicators.

Of course, the study of language use overlaps with linguistics, including both its sub-fields of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Communication scholarship tends to focus more on the pragmatics of language use, as well as the effects of such use, while linguistics often focuses more on structure and function of language. Clearly, however, the two fields overlap, and sometimes their scholarship is difficult to separate. Linguist Deborah Tannen, for example,
has produced some work that is clearly within the realm of linguistics (e.g., 1989), but much of her more popular work (e.g., 1990, 2006) at a minimum straddles the border with communication scholarship.

Communication as Information Transmission

Major strands of theory and research appeared in the U. S. following World War II. Most of them focused on information and transmission, or in other words, how to get a message from Point A to Point B in the most intact fashion possible. The key works associated with this perspective came from engineering, and the technological problems that drove the theorizing concerned the modernizing of the telephone system and the development of high speed computers that could process a great deal of information in a short span of time. Two books stood out in particular: Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver’s The Mathematical Theory of Communication (1949) and Norbert Wiener’s Cybernetics (1948). Shannon and Weaver developed a theory that defined information as the reduction of uncertainty, and his primary concern revolved around how much “noise” (pure uncertainty) in any transmission could be tolerated before the message would be transmitted inaccurately. Wiener’s work described the reduction of uncertainty in systems through feedback that would indicate a change of course was needed. Wiener’s scholarship on the control of systems was instrumental in developing computers, which were popularly known as “thinking machines.” Scholars who built on Shannon and Wiener’s work attempted to model communication based on transmission of information, moderated by feedback. Some scholars believed that these theories could be used to model thought, about which little was then known.
Indeed, a great deal of theory and research in media communication based itself on the transmission model and continued to do so after the appearance of information theory and cybernetics. Two post-World War II research programs illustrated this approach. The first was the Yale Communication and Attitude Change Program, directed by Carl Hovland. Hovland had been one of the scholars who worked on propaganda research for the Federal government during World War II, and after the war he focused his efforts on understanding how people were influenced by other people and their messages to change their attitudes. According to McGuire’s (1996) review of that period, Hovland succeeded because he was able to attract top-notch faculty and graduate students to work on the project and because his management style allowed for creativity of theory development while still keeping research focused on the overriding goal. Hovland’s efforts made attitude change the major topic for social psychological research during the 1950s and 1960s.

The second came via the leadership of Wilbur Schramm, another veteran of the Federal government’s propaganda research program. Schramm moved to Washington, DC, from the University of Iowa, where he was head of the famed Iowa Writers’ Workshop. When the war ended, Schramm wanted to return to Iowa, but his position with the Writers’ Workshop had been filled. Instead, Iowa asked Schramm to head its journalism school, and Schramm accepted the position with the condition that he be allowed to start an institute for communication research. Schramm’s institute spurred the beginning of the field of journalism’s association with mass communication scholarship, as opposed to scholarship about journalism itself. Under Schramm’s tutelage, Iowa scholars and others attempted to take the theoretical work
from information theory and social psychology and apply it more directly to understanding communication phenomena. Journalism scholars were joined in this effort by scholars from the field of speech who were energized both by Kurt Lewin’s work on group dynamics and the Yale Group’s scholarship on individual credibility in promoting attitude change. Schramm became a proselytizer for communication scholarship, and he began institutes at the University of Illinois and Stanford before affiliating with an institute in Hawaii after retirement (Rogers, 1994).

The transmission approach to communication began to break down in the 1960s. David Berlo’s (1960) book, *The Process of Communication*, for example, presented what was then a traditionally linear transmission model of information flow but added the idea that communication was dynamic and cyclical and that research efforts to measure simple effects would ultimately fall short. Berlo urged scholars to account for process in their research, but he did not provide a clear means for so doing. It would take some years before scholars began to devise ways to measure communication as interaction and thus to abandon effects research.

In media research, the transmission model found continued life as part of research using Social Learning Theory and later, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). Research conducted under the theme of learning the audience’s uses and gratifications of media (Blumler & Katz, 1974) would find the transmission model amenable for some time before succumbing to criticism that audiences were more active than the approach gave them credit (e.g., Reinhard & Dervin, 2009).

But, the information transmission approach was not only about movement of data from one point to another. Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) theory also focused on how information
functioned either to increase or decrease entropy, or the level of uncertainty within a system. As Wiener (1948) noted, uncertainty is present in every system and is a healthy element, causing the system to self-correct via the use of negative feedback.

Two different theorists applied this principle to specific situations, marking, in part, a turn away from the development of grand theories of communication and moving toward more contained theories that provided more focused opportunities for testing. The first was Berger’s Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), which was focused on communication between individuals who were just beginning a relationship. Drawing on information theory’s central tenet that individuals process information for the purpose of reducing uncertainty, Berger & Calabrese laid out a set of variables such as amount of verbal communication, nonverbal affiliative expressiveness, information-seeking behavior, intimacy content of messages, reciprocity of information sharing, perceived similarity and liking between communicators, and degree of perceived shared communication networks. From these variables, the authors drew eight axioms and twenty-one theorems that served as the basis for a program of research that has continued through the present day.

The second use of the uncertainty principle emerged from the work of Karl Weick. An organizational psychologist, Weick (1969) proposed that organizing is a process that involves reducing uncertainty through the negotiation of organizational goals and routines. While previous theorists had assumed that organizations were formed to achieve goals, Weick contended that organizational goals evolved out of interaction among the organization’s members. Weick called the process of individual negotiation with the organization and its
members “sensemaking,” and he proposed that organizations were loosely-coupled systems where collective meanings of messages and actions evolved over time. Weick’s notions were radical in that they ignored organizational hierarchies in favor of the power of informal networks to define and influence collective thought and actions. Communication scholars eagerly embraced Weick’s ideas about organizations and have used his sensemaking principle as a means of studying organizational culture, oftentimes using qualitative data such as stories (e.g., Smircich & Calás, 1987).

The information transmission model remains a dominant one in communication scholarship, though its nature has become more process-like and less linear over time.

Communication as Developer of Relationships

Relational communication scholarship emerged from a variety of sources, including anthropology, social and clinical psychology, social work and family studies, and systems analysis. It is likely that scholars from a number of disciplines influenced each other as common problems overlapped. For example, Schramm (1997), who was working on propaganda research during World War II in Washington, DC, shared a carpool with anthropologist Margaret Mead, who was working on conserving food for the war effort and whose program funded Kurt Lewin’s (1948) work on using groups to solidify cooperation from homemakers to use what they might consider to be “inferior” cuts of meat in preparing meals for their families. Mead, in turn, was married to Gregory Bateson, whose work on family systems in the post-World War II era would develop the idea that double binds (communications where meaning was made deliberately unclear) were a basis for relational pathology (Bateson, et al., 1956).
Behavioral researchers approached relationships as a matter of perception (e.g., Heider, 1946; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), while clinical psychologists defined relational intimacy in terms of degrees of authenticity (e.g., Buber, 1947; Rogers, 1961) and degree to which being in relationship with others allowed individuals to self-actualize (Maslow, 1943). In fact, Peters (1999), in his intellectual history of the idea of communication, argued that all curiosity about communication arises from a desire for connection at a number of levels: another’s soul and/or intellect, which we cannot directly experience; those entities (such as plants and animals) that do not use symbols; and connection that is distinguished by authenticity that the participants do experience. The two groups often found themselves at cross-purposes, and they disagreed substantially about the nature of the phenomena they were studying.

Building on Bateson’s work, Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) devised the basis of a formal theory of relational communication. In particular, the group’s five axioms became the cornerstone of a number of research programs: (1) “one cannot not communicate”; (2) “every communication has a content and relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a meta-communication”; (3) “the nature of a relationship is dependent on the punctuation of the partners' communication procedures”; (4) “human communication involves both digital and analogic modalities”; and (5) “inter-human communication procedures are either symmetric or complementary, depending on whether the relationship of the partners is based on differences or parity”. Dubbed “the interactional view,” Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson’s work led the study of communication in relationships away from both competing emphases: variable analysis and psychic connection.
The end of variable analysis did not spell the end of quantitative approaches to relational communication, however. Instead, quantitative research sought to blend verbal and nonverbal elements of communication behavior so as to demonstrate how those elements combine to produce interactive meaning. An exemplar of such an approach, Burgoon’s (1978) Expectancy Violations Theory, proved to be a model of the genre. Burgoon revised her theory often and sometimes substantially based on the data she collected (c.f., Burgoon & Hale, 1988), and the result of persistence and a willingness to reinterpret her findings has made the theory one of the most respected and robust of its type.

Relational communication has also been studied qualitatively, through interviews, personal narratives, and ethnographic approaches. An exemplar of a theory emerging from such study is Relational Dialectics Theory, which was developed by Leslie Baxter and her associates (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Derived from the work of philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), the theory proposed that relationships are developed out of the push and pull of interaction. Some of the contradictory dynamics that the theory has studied are: (1) autonomy vs. connectedness (i.e., how much “I” and how much “we” are needed by relational partners); (2) favoritism vs. impartiality (i.e., how much is each partner treated “fairly,” as opposed to how much each partner is valued as “special”); (3) openness vs. closedness (i.e., how much information is disclosed between partners, as opposed to how much information is kept private); (4) novelty vs. predictability (i.e., how much the relationship feels exciting and new, as opposed to how much it feels comfortable and old); and (5) instrumentality vs.
affection (i.e., how much continuing the relationship is based on tangible rewards, as opposed to how much continuing the relationship is based on emotional rewards).

Relational communication replaced the former “interpersonal communication” as the designator for communication in face-to-face settings. The term implies that it is the relationship that is being studied, not the face-to-face context, and this subtle change in focus has made a great deal of difference in how theorizing in this approach to communication study has proceeded.

Communication as Definer, Interpreter, and Critic of Culture

The early works of the Frankfurt School, specifically critical theory, laid the foundation that led toward one of several paradigm shifts in communication theory during the post-World War II era. According to Jay (1973; 1980), Rogers (1994), Tar (1977) and others, critical theory is the term that refers to a specific tradition of thought that originated with Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer in the 1930s at the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research in Germany. This theory synthesizes ideas advanced by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud and positions media as having the potential to advance the agenda of the bourgeois while controlling the proletariat (Jay, 1973; Tar, 1977). Celikates (2006) posited that critical theory makes it possible for one to understand what is really happening in social reality and to explain these actions in terms of such constructs as socioeconomic structures and who in society has the power. Critical theory, Celikates (2006) further argued, questions and analyzes media, the production of media, and its agents.
In the 1950s at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, a group of scholars founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (what later became known as British Cultural Studies) because they had a desire to understand the changes in post-war British society within the structure of "a long retrospective historical glance" (Hall, 1992, p. 16). Hall (1980) argued that Cultural Studies "defines 'culture' as both the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they 'handle' and respond to the conditions of existence" (p. 63). Having suffered great losses in the two world wars in the first half the 20th century, Britain was no longer the locus of Western power and the wholesale societal shift from Britain to the United States was a major motivating power for the beginning of Cultural Studies (Hall, 1992). The goal was to locate British intellectual dynamics as they were as well as identify how the inevitable breaking-away of British communication traditions occurred and what meanings were implied by the whole process.

An essential element of the new paradigm was to redefine and refocus the meaning of communication itself. Hall (1992) cited the practice of analyzing communication as similar to a circle of activity. The emerging idea was to think of communication as "structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction" (p. 128). This idea came to be known as structuralism and had its roots not just in Marxist theory; but in early semiotics theory (Hall, 1980). For Hall though, there were inherent problems in the idea of structuralism such that the content of ideas gives way to patterns of ideas that may be contained in a communication, as well as the
means or conventions, whether literary, linguistic, or social, by which the ideas are encoded and function toward making meaning.

The encoding of a communication event is only part of the process of communication itself, carrying no essential meaning without an audience (or receiver) to decode what the meaning is, and by decoding the message, the audience constructs the meaning. Hall (1992) provided the example of a TV news broadcast, which has an outcome on the society in which the encoded message is transmitted only when the meanings are decoded. Hall posited that there were three types of readings of meanings of a message when it was decoded. The dominant or preferred reading is produced by those whose status favors the preferred readings and therefore do not question the dominant ideology; the negotiated readings are produced by those who interpret the preferred reading as it is aligned with their societal status; and the oppositional readings are produced by those whose social status puts them in direct conflict with the dominant ideology.

Adding further to the foundation laid by the Frankfurt School and the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, was theorist Jurgen Habermas, who was a student of Theodore Adorno. During his tenure at the Frankfurt School, Habermas focused his research on how a new public sphere materialized during both the age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution in Europe and the American Revolution in the United States and how this new public sphere encouraged political discourse (Jay, 1973; Kellner, 2000; Wiggerhaus 1994). Habermas' theory of the public sphere was a metaphorical "space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power ... [that
bridges] where private interests prevail and the state which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination" (Kellner, 2000, p. 260-261). Using the U.S. wars in both Vietnam and the Gulf Wars as examples, Habermas developed the view that public opinion and understanding of the wars were primarily shaped by "the demonstrative rationality of the military planning, and the unparalleled presence of the media" (Habermas, 1994, p. 6). The "encoding" objectives of those in power was, in Habermas' view, involved in managing how much information and precisely what information to dispense to the general public in a way that was meant to influence public opinion and to install a "staged reality" that not just for the general public, but for the "mediators" of public information as well. The act of installing a staged reality, Habermas argued, transformed media from a place that aided rational discourse to one that limited such discourse to what media corporations wished to discuss.

Besides the cultural studies approach, which often took societal critique as a given, theorizing and scholarship has also been devoted to understanding communication across cultures or across groups within cultures. Much of the theorizing in this area of study built on either the information transmission or the relational approach (c.f., Gudykunst, 2005), but one attempt to develop a unique cultural perspective on communication has come from the work of Guo Ming Chen. Chen, who splits his time between the University of Rhode Island and the South China University of Technology, has outlined in a series of articles (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2004, 2005, 2006) a vision of communication based in several Asian concepts: harmony, the polarity of the yin and the yang, the Tao, the I Ching, and Confucian spirituality. Assuming
Chen’s formulation is developed further through research, it could provide a new direction for theorizing about how communication is culture-specific.

Concluding Remarks

In 1999, Robert T. Craig summarized different theoretical strands in communication scholarship into seven “traditions:” rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical. Craig (1999) defined the rhetorical tradition as considering communication to be a practical art; the semiotic tradition as considering communication to be intersubjective mediation via signs; the phenomenological tradition as considering communication to be the capacity of experience otherness through authentic dialogue; the cybernetic tradition as considering communication to be synonymous with information processing; the sociopsychological tradition as considering communication to be expression, interaction and influence; the sociocultural traditional as considering communication to be the means by which the social order may be (re)produced; and the critical tradition as considering communication to be discursive reflection, particularly on hegemonic ideological forces and how these might be critiqued. Each of these traditions combines ontology and epistemology differently (Anderson & Baym, 2004), making communication theory truly a “big tent” encompassing social sciences, humanities, and arts.

Craig (1999) worried that scholars adhering to each of his traditions were sufficiently different from each other that they potentially could not engage in dialogue about what issues were important to communication as a discipline. Disciplinary dialogue, Craig argued, is essential to growth, development, and ultimately to disciplinary health. While we have defined
the major intellectual strands of communication in a slightly different manner than did Craig, we do not have the same worries. There may be no such thing as COMMUNICATION THEORY, but there may be many communication theories, each proceeding from a different understanding of communication phenomena and each contributing to scholarship proceeding from that understanding. There may be quarrels about which of these understandings is “correct” (or, more likely, which might be considered “incorrect” or “inadequate”), but ultimately we find commonality through appreciating the variety of different approaches and the scholarship they have produced. “Communication” may turn out to be the wrong term to define what we are studying, but for the moment it’s good enough.
References


