DISCUSSION

PETER SIMONSON
University of Colorado, Boulder

LEONARDA GARCÍA-JIMÉNEZ
State University of Murcia

JOHAN SIEBERS
University of Central Lancashire

ROBERT T. CRAIG
University of Colorado

Some foundational conceptions of communication: Revising and expanding the traditions of thought

ABSTRACT
This work presents and defines three meanings of communication taking into account some of the traditions of thought that founded our field of study. These three conceptions are: communication as an architectonic art; communication as a social force; 

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and communication as the encounter with truth. These three conceptions are considered with regard to several traditions of thought conceptualized in Craig’s (1999) constitutive metamodel of communication theory (rhetorical, sociopsychological, critical and phenomenological). Furthermore, the discussion expands the traditions of thought, adding American pragmatism (Craig’s proposal would be included in it), and a new tradition that highlights the element of undecidability in communication, partly as an extension of phenomenology and partly with its own historical roots in Badiou’s philosophy of the event.

INTRODUCTION

The following discussion continues a dialogue that began with a panel session called ‘Core Ideas of the Discipline of Communication and the Evolution from Modernity to Postmodernity in a Cross-national Perspective’ that took place in San Francisco during the 96th Annual Convention of NCA (National Communication Association). The discussion has several objectives. First, it develops some of the most important conceptions of communication proposed by the field of communication along the twentieth century. Second, it updates key ideas, traditions of thought, and authors that define some of the foundational pathways of the discipline of communication. Finally, it identifies some of the most important mega-trends and intellectual themes of communication included in or related with the traditions of thought of the constitutive metamodel proposed by Craig (1999).

The discussion focuses on three conceptions of communication that operate on different ontological levels. On the one hand, the architectonic perspective in American pragmatism works from the metatheoretical level, focusing on ways of conceiving and producing disciplined knowledge about communication and its problems, often with explicit attention to history. On the other hand, critical and functionalist thought operate on a social level, putting (technologically mediated) communication in the epicentre of society. Finally, the mystical and phenomenology are interested in the interpersonal dimension of human interaction. In the first section, Peter Simonson introduces the architectonic perspective in American pragmatism, which works from the metatheoretical level focusing on ways of conceiving and producing disciplined knowledge about communication and its problems, often with explicit attention to history. In the second section, Leonarda García-Jiménez develops the conception of communication as a social force in critical and functionalist thought, which operates on a social level, putting (technologically mediated) communication in the epicentre of society. In the third section, Johan Siebers develops a conception of communication as an encounter with truth, based on Badiou’s philosophy of the event, which works in the interpersonal dimension of human interaction. These three conceptions of communication are considered with regard to several traditions of thought conceptualized in Craig’s (1999) constitutive metamodel of communication theory (rhetorical, sociopsychological, critical and phenomenological). We have focused in those that had a greater presence in the field of communication. Robert T. Craig’s reflections in response to Simonson, García-Jimenez and Siebers conclude the discussion.
PRAGMATIST RHETORICAL ARCHITECTONICS

Peter Simonson

Since its origins in the late nineteenth century, pragmatism has centrally concerned itself with communication. That project has taken multiple forms, attending to the creation of moral and political communities, the activities of always-already social selves, and the discovery and construction of knowledge in a world lacking clear foundations for it. In this section, I focus on an impulse within pragmatism that has received relatively little attention, but which reveals some of the tradition’s grandest hopes – namely, the creation of rhetorically oriented architectonic schemes for producing and organizing knowledge in pluralistic worlds. We can see this impulse in Robert Craig’s metamodel for communication theory in the early twenty-first century, which seeks to bring order to a multi-voiced conversation among disparate intellectual lineages. His project inspires the ‘discussion’ we are carrying out in this paper, but it also extends two earlier pragmatist architectonics I want briefly to discuss – Richard McKeon’s and Charles Sanders Peirce’s. McKeon influenced Craig’s early thinking while Peirce is more a pragmatist predecessor. Throwing the three into comparative relief reveals one of the last century’s distinctive intellectual projects – namely, to construct communicative means for managing problems partly generated by communication itself. These pragmatist architectonics operate in a different register than do the theories that García-Jiménez and Siebers discuss – less sociological than mass communications research and more politically detached than critical theory and cultural studies; more focused on communal processes of inquiry than singular eruptions of truth events, on the establishment of orders or knowledge more than their interruption. But like these different traditions, the architectonic strand of pragmatism is significant to both communication history and ongoing theory and practice, as I hope my discussion will suggest.

I begin with a scene-setting claim that I can only assert: among all else that it was, the twentieth century was a rhetorical century. First, it saw the proliferation and technological transformation of discourse traditionally classified as rhetorical – aimed at persuading, delighting, uplifting, or instructing public and especially popular audiences. From advertising, public relations, and marketing to radio, television, and the Internet, new techniques and technologies extended what the historian Robert Albion (1932) retroactively termed ‘the communication revolution’ that began in the early nineteenth century, materially and culturally transforming rhetorical discourse. Second, and partly as a consequence, the twentieth was a century that hosted the intellectual revival of rhetoric. From the 1920s on, sometimes drawing upon precursors like Nietzsche and to a lesser degree Peirce, rhetoric was revived by an interdisciplinary host of philosophers, literary scholars, and social scientists. Third, the twentieth century witnessed a much wider attention to communication, media, and the social effects of language – all traditional concerns of rhetoric, which dispersed itself broadly (Bender and Wellbery 1990).

In casting the twentieth as a rhetorical century, I am building upon the work of the philosopher Richard McKeon (b.1900–d.1985), a prodigious and difficult thinker who studied with John Dewey, picked up and refined parts of the classic pragmatist heritage, and brought them into proximity with the
history and philosophy of rhetoric. Taking the long historical view, McKeon charted the changing fortunes of rhetoric in dynamic relation to philosophy, poetry, and other arts (Backman 1987). In one of his more important pieces, he showed how rhetoric attained the status of a productive architectonic art first in the late Roman republic, when it provided the basis for ‘a program of education and culture designed to reunite eloquence and wisdom in action’; and again during the Renaissance, when rhetoric architectonically aided the ‘discovery and organization of the beautiful arts and beautiful letters’ (McKeon 1987: 7–9). Rhetoric’s fortunes declined in the seventeenth century, which launched natural science as architectonic, and the eighteenth century, when Kant and others championed philosophical reason instead. The time was ripe for a revival, McKeon believed.

As we enter the final decades of this century, we boast of a vast increase of output in all arts, and we are puzzled by the absence of interdisciplinary connection and by the breakdown of interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural communication. We need a new architectonic productive art [...] Rhetoric provides the devices by which to determine the characteristics and problems of our times and to form the art by which to guide actions for the solution of our problems and the improvement of our circumstances.

(McKeon 1987: 11)

Calling for a new architectonic art fit for a technological age, McKeon showed his pragmatist colours, identifying rhetoric as the art for determining and solving problems, including the problem of communication breakdown. He envisioned rhetoric as a universal art for a pluralistic world, which could maintain heterogeneity among theoretical and cultural vocabularies and reject all simplifying reductivisms (Plochman 1990). The overarching project had practical elements to it, but McKeon departed from his teacher Dewey by affirming ‘the primacy of theoria over praxis’, and championing an architectonic whose primary office consisted in ‘managing disciplinary boundaries’ (Depew 2000: 47–48; 2010: 43).

McKeon’s new architectonic rhetoric resonated with ambitions Peirce had begun articulating a century earlier. In his foundational essay, ‘On a New List of Categories’ he had mentioned a new trivium of sciences tied to his nascent theory of signs – rhetoric joining a similarly refigured grammar and logic and addressing ‘the formal conditions of the force of symbols, or their power of appealing to a mind’ (Peirce 1992: 8). Rhetoric was arguably the most important and least developed of Peirce’s new trivium, which over his corpus assumed three connotations – ‘one concerned with the formal conditions of communication and conviction, the second concerned with the systematic and architectonic of inquiry, and the third with general procedures for effective inquiries’ (Liszka 2000: 469; see also Lyne 1980; Liszka 1996; Short 2007; Bergman 2009).

In one of his more accessible and extended discussions of the subject, Peirce addressed rhetoric within a discussion of ‘the late enormous multiplication of true scientific workers, […] the best vocabulary for one or another branch of knowledge, and the best types of title for scientific papers’ – problems of language, pluralism, and communication. He went on to advocate a ‘speculative rhetoric’, using ‘speculative’ in the Latin sense ‘corresponding to the Greek word theoretical [and] […] intended to signify that the study is of the
purely scientific kind’ (Peirce 1998: 328). It was an architectonic scheme with three subsidiary components – one organized around ‘the special nature of the ideas to be conveyed’, the second around the ‘special class of signs to be interpreted – the special medium of communication’, and the third around ‘the special nature of signs into which the interpretation is to take place’ (which meant studying those bodily, psychological, and social habits through which signs come ‘to be translated into human thought’, which Peirce considered ‘a special kind of sign’) (Peirce 1998: 329–30). Across the three areas, Peirce’s speculative rhetoric provided order from which to consider the social purposes, media, and interpretation of communication.

Like McKeon’s high modernist project of the post-war era, Peirce’s pragmatist architectonic tilted toward disciplined knowledge and broadly favoured theory over practice. In Peirce’s case, the architectonic organized itself under the broader sign of science, while McKeon would affiliate with a humanist philosophy that by the 1960s was setting itself off from science in the ‘two cultures’ dispute of the era (Depew 2010). Both men took knowledge to be in very basic ways communicative – generated for Peirce through scientifically oriented communal inquiry, and for McKeon through cross-cultural conversation, philosophical dialogue, and categorizing competing positions by means of a meta-level ‘philosophical semantics’. While pragmatism as a whole is defined in terms of its attention to problems (Russill 2008), the nature of these problems and favoured means for dealing with them varies across the tradition. Peirce and McKeon both generally emphasized intellectual problems and elite forms of knowing, doing, and making, thus separating themselves off from more populist inflections of pragmatism.

In contrast to Peirce and McKeon, Craig’s rhetorical architectonic goes further in connecting theory with a wider social range of communicative practices, problems, and ways of understanding, while still oriented toward issues related to pluralism. His ‘constitutive metamodel’ seeks to show how ‘communication theory in all its open-ended diversity can be a coherent field, and useful too’ (Craig 1999: 128). It opens out toward contemporary problems and practices as toward competing historical traditions that feed into the academic field of communication theory. In his classic article introducing the architectonic scheme, Craig identified seven core traditions of communication theory (leaving the door open for other traditions as well): rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical (Craig 1999; Craig and Muller 2007). Prompted by Chris Russill, Craig later added pragmatism as an eighth tradition, while also noting that the constitutive metamodel was itself a pragmatist theory (Craig 2007). Each of the traditions theorizes communication and its problems differently, operates with distinctive vocabularies, and is both confirmed and challenged by different ‘metadiscursive commonplaces’ about communication widely held in the culture at large. The scheme also provides ‘topoi (that is, dialectical commonplaces or stock arguments) for argumentation across the traditions’ (Craig 1999: 132), thus providing a means of putting the traditions into structured conversation with one another.

Though Craig explicitly casts rhetoric as simply one among the eight core traditions feeding the field of communication theory, his constitutive metamodel is also what Peirce would recognize as a speculative architectonic rhetoric – a fact partly revealed in the vocabulary of topoi and commonplaces. The metamodel traverses the first and third areas of Peirce’s scheme – addressing rhetorics of knowing while also providing some guidance for how we should
interpret competing traditions (each of which provides its own habits of interpretation). In comparison to both Peirce and McKeon, Craig goes much further in connecting elite rhetorics of knowing with everyday rhetorics and widely felt problems. At the same time, Craig’s architectonic is more field-specific, situated within the academic discipline of communication and more specifically communication theory. In other words, while Peirce’s speculative rhetoric encompasses all manners of signification, interpretation, and media and aspires to be a universal architectonic within a reconstituted trivium, Craig’s metamodel casts more specific attention to a professionalized field. It anchors the elite language games of academic communication theory in broader social domains but also sets them off in their own architectonic. Peirce aspired to a building open to all scientifically-minded knowers. McKeon sought to bring order knowledge as generated across the university, and from there, outward to society. Craig in turn seeks to organize and bring ‘dialogical-dialectical coherence’ to the field of communication theory and turn it toward ‘a common focus on communication problems in society and debating practical approaches’ (Craig 2007: 125). As he has described his original aspirations, ‘The explicit political project of the constitutive metamodel […] had to do with the politics of the academic field of communication’ (Craig 2007: 141).

In the end, then, Craig’s is an amphibious rhetorical architectonic, spanning theory, pedagogy, and public practice from within the communication discipline. In the history I have very briefly sketched, it is a fitting scheme for a rhetorical century; a rhetorically oriented communicative solution to problems of communication writ larger. Craig likens it to ‘a scaffold for building a scheme of rhetorical invention […] that can assist in preparing students of communication to participate in the discourse of the discipline at large’, which might also build ‘a common discursive space – a space for theoretical metadiscourse – in which more specialized theoretical discourses can engage with each other and with practical metadiscourse on questions of communication as a social practice’ (Craig 1999: 154). In this regard, Craig’s architectonic helps translate matters of widespread concern into more specialized theoretical languages, providing discursive forums for pluralistic conversation among them, and unleashing theoretically informed students back into the practices of everyday life where they might engage common problems and advance the meliorist project that has long powered pragmatism. In the arc that runs from Peirce to McKeon and Craig, we can see the philosophical idea of communication coming to reside in the discipline of communication, among the youngest of the social sciences.

COMMUNICATION AS A KEY SOCIAL FORCE

Leonarda García-Jiménez

I develop in this section one of the foundational conceptualizations of communication within the field of communication along the last century: communication as a key social force. Communication, above all Technologically Mediated
Communication (TMC), which is integrated by mass and social media, is a key social force in the interaction between the dominant ideologies (that conform status quo/consensus) and the counter-ideologies – the alternative narratives to the official consensus. In doing so, TMC is in the epicentre of the symbolic tensions, between the included voices/groups and those voices/groups that are excluded from the definition of status quo that conforms reality. The conception of communication as a key social force was one of the main theoretical developments of two of the most important traditions of thought within our field of study during the twentieth century: the critical (Frankfurt School and Cultural Studies) and the sociopsychological (Mass Communication Research). That is why it is not too daring to point out that communication as a social force has been one of the conceptions that have founded the field of communication along the last century. This is the common theoretical space shared by the critical and the functionalist thinking in their conceptualizations of mass media during the twentieth century. Both of them developed mass communications as a key social force for the maintenance of established order, neutralizing counter-ideologies. It would be possible to summarize their approaches in the communicative paradox. That is, communication is the activity that reproduces order and excludes/oppresses for the reproduction of this order, and communication, at the same time, is the emancipation from this oppressive social environment.

From this point of view, society is the place where the tension between power and counter-power takes place, and this tension is generated by communication. Power is defined as the symbolic capacity of defining, selecting, and excluding the elements that shape reality. It is an ideological power for signifying events in a particular way. As Hall has pointed out (2009: 123):

The power to signify is not a neutral force in society [...] The signification of events is part of what has to be struggled over, for it is the means by which collective social understanding are created [...] Ideology becomes a site of struggle (between compelling definitions) and a stake – a prize to be won – in the conduct of particular struggles.

Starting from this conception of power, counter-power (or counter-ideology) is the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized (Castells 2007: 239). The thesis of this section is that the twentieth was a century with less symbolic tension between power and counter-power that the twenty-first. The higher problematization could be explained through the emergence of social media and, in general, a cyberculture that is promoting horizontal interactions and decreasing the hierarchical tension of authority (Galindo 2006).

In the previous section, my colleague Simonson has highlighted the metatheoretical wealth of the field. And I want to show, from the same metatheoretical perspective – the seven traditions of thought proposed by Craig (1999) – a common conception of mass communication based on the critical and sociopsychological traditions of thought. This general and social approach is a step in the transition from communication as rhetoric art (Simonson) to communication as the encounter with truth (as Siebers develops in the next section).

There is a common space shared by the critical and sociopsychological traditions during the twentieth century: both of them developed mass communication as an institution that generated communicative processes to maintain
the established order. These communicative processes were forces that helped to eliminate counter-ideologies, reinforcing the power of the dominant elite. Mass communication was a conservative force that helped to maintain established order, and for that goal, eliminated counter-ideologies. Ideology is a system of coding reality that, according to these two traditions, supports the interests of dominant groups.

From this point of view, the critical and functionalist descriptions of the role of mass media (and communicative processes in a general way) were not so different or antagonistic. In this sense, Lasswell (1960: 123) pointed out that communicative processes maintained the social order, creating a social stable structure that ‘reveals more or less concentration of relatively abundant shares of power, wealth, and other values in a few hands […] In every society the values are shaped and distributed according to distinctive patterns (institutions)’.

In the same way, Williams (1976) argued that the power of dominant elite shaped a particular way of seeing the world and human nature and relationships until configuring a hegemonic situation. The concentration of power in a few hands was recognized too by the theory of gatekeeper (Schramm 1960: 177): ‘communication chains are far from perfect, and that, with communication organized as it is, a few important gatekeepers have an enormous power over our views of our environment’.

About the elimination of counter-ideologies, according to Lasswell (1960), the equilibrium was maintained through communication, a useful tool for eliminating counter-ideologies and reinforcing the power and ideology of dominant elites. Marcuse (1991) pointed out as well the elimination of counter-ideologies with his one-dimensional man whose critical thought has been neutralized by capitalism. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) and Klapper (1960) developed in a similar way the conservative functioning of the system. Horkheimer and Adorno (1993) highlighted too how the system excluded new or original contributions in culture, because the capitalist logic just reproduces what is going to be an economic success; the (conservative) system just repeats the same successful formulas and ideas.

The most important difference between the two traditions was in the ethical evaluation of the described situation, which is blameworthy for critical theorists and just as described by functionalists. Another difference would be that functionalism focused on equilibrium (DeFleur 1960) and critical thought focused on the (negative) consequences/causes of this consensus/equilibrium (Hokheimer and Adorno 1993). This negative environment was integrated by manipulation, exclusion, alienation, and the marginalization of those alternative perspectives to the status quo. But both traditions of thought described a society with a dominant system of coding reality and the tendency to neutralize counter-ideologies, that is, the alternative ideologies to status quo.

In that way, the critical and functionalist traditions perceived power as a symbolic force that defines and selects the elements that shape our conception of reality. And this conception of power pointed out the domination of the elite ideologies and the exclusion of counter-ideologies along the last century. We need to remember that, according to these two traditions of thought, mass media were conservative institutions that tried to exclude any kind of change. And this process of neutralizing counter-power created a symbolic tension between the included and excluded voices. In order to eliminate the counter-ideologies, the reproduction of a negative environment (like the marginalization of minorities, manipulation, lack of informative transparency,
etc.) was necessary. Thus, the elimination of counter-ideologies tended to exclude subcultures or alternative points of view in the definition of rules that construct social reality. In other words, the system where mass media had a very important role, tended to exclude the points of view that disturbed the social order.

Up to here, I have shown a few brushstrokes of the common theoretical space shared by the critical and the functionalist traditions. These brushstrokes must be understood as part of an un-finished painting, but even like that, they show a common ontological conception of power and mass communication along the last century. Power, as power of signification, was in the hands above all of the conservative institutions of mass media. Based on this conceptualization of mass communication, from a general way, Technologically Mediated Communication is a key social force in the struggle between ideologies and counter-ideologies. We should remember how important TMC was in the construction and reproduction of public sphere (Habermas 1989). Nowadays TMC is not just mass media but social media. The latter are altering the nature of power and the nature of symbolic struggles, because the open and horizontal character of social media (Castells 2007) is basic for the emergence of the ‘Resistance Performance’. This is a paradigm that highlights the alternative narratives about power and social justice against dominant power structures (Atkinson 2010). In this context, the Internet is allowing the mobilization and the construction of temporary and alternative communities (e.g. the anti-globalization movement or the movements against dictatorships in Tunisia or Egypt at the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011). There is a higher tension between power and counter-power because counter-ideologies have more tools for challenging the status quo. Social media enable counter-power to create its own communicative spaces and channels. As Castells points out (2007: 238),

The development of interactive, horizontal networks of communication has induced the rise of a new form of communication, mass self-communication, over the Internet and wireless communication networks. Under these conditions, insurgent politics and social movements are able to intervene more decisively in the new communication space.

The ‘Resistance Performance’, that is, the alternative narratives against dominant ideologies that are emerging through new technologies – among other channels – (Atkinson 2010) are changing the ‘rules of the game’ marked by mass media during the twentieth century. More voices and groups, that is, more alternative ideologies can participate in the public sphere because of the social media and its open character. And this opening of the public sphere with alternative discourses is making more complex the process of defining reality because more voices are participating in the symbolic struggles pointed out by Hall (2009). Definitely, social media is structuring the organization of the counter-ideologies because of its powerful opportunities in the new public space (Castells 2007).

The public space during the mass society was in the hands, above all, of the mass media (Habermas 1989; Thompson 1995. The creation of consensus was above all in the hands of those privileged groups that could access the media. Nowadays, because of the informational revolution of the 1970s (Castells 2007), more groups have access to the definition of reality because more groups have access to technologically mediated communicative processes. This situation implies that symbolic minorities and subcultures have
more symbolic power than in mass society (Castells 2007). One example that illustrates this greater access to public space is alternative media like the Independent Media Center-Indymedia.org or MoveOn.org, a useful tool for eroding the structural domination of society, ‘Conceptualizations of power found in alternative media content aid in the construction and reinforcement of worldviews concerning power and social justice in society and set the stage for Resistance Performance’ (Atkinson 2010: 34).

The new structure of power that has a network geometry in which ‘power relationships are always specific to a given configuration of actors and institutions (Castells 2007: 320). As Poster (in Curran 2006: 138) has pointed out ‘the web is transferring power to the people, and facilitating the construction of emancipated subjectivities’.

With this conceptualization of society as symbolic place, we see that in the evolution from mass to network society, TMC has been in the epicentre of the process.

The horizontal character of the network society and the public space means that the contemporary process of the construction of social reality is more complex than in mass society, because network society includes more counter-definitions of reality represented by the characteristic diversity of the postmodern moment. That is, more realities are now visible.

Therefore, the elimination of counter-ideologies from the status quo and the official public space that characterized mass society is not so evident in network society. The public sphere, still partly controlled by mass media, is in a process of opening because subcultures, traditionally marginalized, have started to be visible and disseminate their voices and points of view (Vattimo 1992). And in this opening, social and alternative media are having an outstanding role.

**COMMUNICATION AS THE ENCOUNTER WITH TRUTH**

*Johan Siebers*

Communication has been one of the key concepts within the social thought along the last century. We have seen various aspects of communication theory and its links to postmodern thought. But what are the ontological implications of the communicative phenomenon? Has communication only been a social force in the construction of modernity and postmodernity? Or could we go beyond, pointing out that authenticity and truth are to be found in Direct Interpersonal Interaction (DII), or conversely, that Direct Personal Interaction, in a sense that would have to be specified further, refers to the moments of authenticity and truth? With the help of some of the recent developments in continental philosophy, which present a ‘return to the real’ and which challenge some of the basic assumptions of both postmodernism and the pragmatic-procedural conception of rationality of discourse ethics, I will highlight some of the implications for communication theory of these questions. I will sketch a conceptualization of communication as event and praxis, which implies that in communication lies an encounter with truth. This encounter
leads to a praxis of inclusion and action, but at first it is individual, in a relevant sense undecidable and, more importantly incomunicable. This adds a clear complexity to the communicative phenomenon and offers a way to articulate some of the well-known paradoxes of communication – especially the dual nature of sharing and withholding that is present in all communicative acts. Is incomunicability a factor for communication? Within the postmodern moment, how important is the recovery of the ideas of truth and authenticity? What are the implications of the post-postmodern for communication theory?

This third section, then, represents the third grand conception of communication. Badiou (2005) will function as a guide. Badiou’s work has become an important voice in contemporary continental philosophy, especially because of the prospects his philosophy offers for moving beyond the dead end of postmodern thought. Badiou attempts to reconcile contingency and multiplicity with the idea of the unconditional, in a radically materialist philosophical discourse. The basis of his philosophy is formed by the idea that ontology is mathematics (Zermelo–Fränkel set theory) and that what cannot be thought in mathematics is the event – the interruption of the new (which always retains an element of the unnameable) in science, politics, art, or love. The event summons fidelity and becomes the basis of a theory of the subject, an ethic, a theory of truth, and a new form of praxis (as contingent, engaged, and universal). The event, in this philosophically fundamental meaning, is an encounter or happening that forms the basis of human action, creativity, and engagement. It can never be brought about by communicative sociality but must be seized by the singularity we can become in response (Badiou speaks of fidelity) to such an event. At first sight, this philosophical approach seems to be deeply hostile to the idea that communication, be it Direct Interpersonal Interaction or Technologically Mediated Communication, is any way fundamental or central to human existence, other than as the mere circulation of opinions, the consensual reproduction of social and psychological order. I will explore the claim that this is not the case, and that we can only conceptualize essential aspects of the communicative act and the function of communication in the interpersonal and the social and political domains if we recognize the role played in communication by what Badiou calls the event and its resulting praxis.

For some, even the most fundamental philosophical wonder, the question we ask of being and that being asks of us, points to a communication between man and world in which both are unfinished, open and in dialogue with each other. Communication assumes an ontological dimension, which in the tradition of classical philosophy has been understood as a unity of opposites, at the most general level that of the identity and the difference, the one and the many of being. In recent European philosophy we can observe a return to that ontological question of communication – or rather a return of communication as an ontological phenomenon.

For Badiou the event is the interruption of the new as a disruptive surplus in a given situation: something that affirms itself but has no place in the existing order. The occurrence of an event always retains an element of the unnameable or undecidable, and forces us to recognize it as having happened, and this recognition is an active process, a decision, constitutive of a revolutionary or transformative praxis. Badiou, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, recognizes four areas of interruption of the new: science, politics, art, and love. Philosophy thinks the ‘compossibility’ of events in these four areas, in
any given historical epoch or meta-situation. An event has the character of an encounter with truth. It is strictly individual or incommunicable at first, but as it summons fidelity from those who recognize it to be an event which disrupts a stabilized practice (a regional ‘ontology’ we might say), it becomes the basis of a theory of the subject (the subject is that which realizes or manifests an event; those who achieve its realization are the ‘militants’ of the event), of (political, artistic, scientific, or amorous) praxis and of an ethic (an event remains unnameable at the core and inspires a process of truth which nevertheless remains incomplete and ‘incompletable’). An example could be the painting of Picasso. As an encounter of truth, the painting that we call Picasso’s disrupted an iconographic ontology which it both addressed and in which it was a surplus: it was new. The moment of its occurrence remains intractable and indefinable: ultimately, it was up to Picasso to recognize the event as having taking place. In fidelity to it, Picasso, as the agent of the event, created the paintings that, collectively, constitute the subject of the event. In principle, the whole world (the infinite multiplicity we call being) can be seen anew in the light of the ‘Picasso event’. The painting career of Picasso is the realization and attempted totalization of that particular style of painting. It is not unthinkable, and it has in fact happened, that others have recognized the style in their own way and have thus also ‘signed up’ to the ‘Picasso event’ – whether creatively or as viewers.

The event, in this philosophically-fundamental meaning, is an encounter or happening that forms the basis of human action, creativity, and engagement. There are distinct decisionist undertones in Badiou’s analysis, and the morally binding question whether or not, in any given situation, we are dealing with a genuine event, seems impossible to resolve in abstraction of a concrete context of action. While Badiou has spent a lot of effort working out an ethic of the event, in terms of the unnameability of the event, the incompletable nature of the process of truth it inspires, and the violence implicit in pseudo-events (such as fascism), the language he uses is quite obviously militant and at first sight adversarial rather than consensual. Truth becomes indispensible and cannot be substituted with the process of establishing the validity of truth claims in practices of legitimization, but truth can never be brought about by communicative sociality alone, rather it must be seized by the singularity we can become in response to an event. Indeed, Badiou has been very critical of Habermas (1984) and of the idea of a theory of communicative rationality. He sails between relativist postmodernity as the impossibility of philosophy as a rational discourse of totality or infinity on one hand, and the pragmatic rescue of reason (and with it of a critical social theory) by a theory of the communicative, practical, principles of legitimization on the other. Against the postmoderns, Badiou insists on the indispensability of a discourse of truth and totality, and against Habermas he insists on the incommunicability of the event of truth, or more precisely on the fact that an event constitutes the terms of its communicability anew in each case, and thus requires a decision or concrete engagement from those involved: all communication is also confrontation. The danger that lies in the idea of truth as event – the fact that a pseudo-event can be mistaken for an event – is no less real or no greater than the danger that lies in the expulsion of the category of truth that we have witnessed in philosophy for so long now.

‘Wo aber gefahr ist, da wächst das Rettende auch’ (‘But where danger is, also the saving power grows’, Hölderlin 1969). If we take Badiou’s philosophy seriously, it appears that every communication, in order to be a genuine communication, involves an undecidability, which is a non-propositional
Some foundational conceptions of communication

encounter of some sort or other, and which is a rupture or surplus in a situation – communicating is transcending, or perhaps better: transgressing. Here lies one of the general aspects of communication, both linguistically and non-linguistically. The moment or event of transgression creates a world as a process of truth which forms the biotope for shared, collective, agency; even the phenomenological description of the interpersonal encounter (Buber 1979; Levinas 1961) is one of an interruption, of a transgression of the sphere of self to see the other as the new. The distinctive nature of praxis, as ordered or reasonable practice, in the light of principles, values, and goals is intrinsically bound up with the intractable nature of the event that constitutes a world by disappearing behind its horizon.

Referring to Robert Craig’s (1999) identification of the constitutive metamodel of communication, the following questions emerge, which I lay out here as the structural elements of a critical discussion between (much of present-day) communication theory and the Badiouian theory of the event, without trying to answer them:

1. Confronted with the theory of truth developed by Badiou, we have to consider again what the relation between truth and communication is. The formation of communality in and by practices of communication (the constitutive metamodel) can perhaps be seen to be grounded in practices of truth-encounters, of something that is already seen to matter in the situation. If so, what are the implications? Can we find here, perhaps, pointers to a way of thinking about communication that allows us to grasp what remains out of reach of a Habermasian, pragmatist, theory of communication, namely what it means when communication breaks down more or less completely because the willingness to engage in practices of communicative rationality is absent?

2. Can we, in this way, perhaps understand better what is meant by saying that communication theory is intrinsically bound up with communicative practice, in that communication is already a ‘richly meaningful term’ (Craig) when it becomes the object of explicit reflection and critique in a given situation? An event constitutes the terms of its own communicability as we have said, and creates its own situation, which is open in the sense that it starts off a process of realization that is in principle expansive (others can ‘sign up’ to the event, and the event becomes the starting point of a new, potentially all-encompassing, ontology); in other words the communicative event refers essentially to praxis, it is a dimension of praxis, or to put it differently, it highlights a hidden dimension in the Aristotelian notion of praxis by naming the emergence of the basis for the principles that constitute the rationality of a given praxis.

3. If we recognize that a conception of truth as encounter is necessary, also for a theory of communication, we have to ask if the phenomenon of ‘encountering’, or ‘being seized by’ a ‘truth’ constitutes a specific form of communication that could be conceptualized as such – in other words: are we dealing here with a new tradition in the conceptualization of communication?

Communication theorists – and indeed communicators – have always known that communication is a precarious and, in a word, dangerous affair – inextricably linked to the paradoxes of human existence – and have sought to understand this danger in different ways. The promise of the developments in contemporary philosophy that I have referred to here for our understanding
of communication can be found, more than anywhere else, in that they may allow us to do justice to this aspect of communication in a new and enriching way, potentially forcing us to re-draw large parts of our conceptual maps of what happens in communication. Communication is not just difficult because of all the pragmatic considerations that have to do with the legitimization and validity of truth claims and other speech acts, or only because of the inherent intricacies of communication as the engine of progress, as a constitutive, community – or identity – building or disruptive, community-contesting, and transforming force. At a deeper level, communication occurs in the face of something that remains inexpressible and yet reached-after, and that lies at the heart of communication: also in its progressive public and private uses. That inexpressible core around which communication in its manifest aspects circles and from which it derives its significance, makes communication the manifestation, the medium, of humanity. In recognizing that inexpressibility the danger, and the rescue, of communication lie.

RESPONSE TO SIMONSON, GARCIA-JIMENEZ, AND SIEBERS

Robert T. Craig

The dialogue that continues in this forum began with an invitation from Leonarda García-Jiménez to reflect on the core ideas of the communication discipline as conceived in her project, The Construction of Communicological Thinking. This project hopes to accomplish for communication something like what Nisbet (1966) attempted in sociology: to develop a history of the core ‘unit-ideas’ (as distinct from systems or schools of thought) that ‘provide fundamental, constitutive substance to sociology amid all the manifest differences among its authors’ (Nisbet 1996: 5).

Nisbet argued that five core ideas of the nineteenth century constituted the sociological tradition: community, authority, status, the sacred, and alienation. Each idea is ‘linked to a conceptual opposite, to a kind of antithesis, from which it derives much of its continuing meaning in the sociological tradition’ (Nisbet 1996: 6). These are, respectively: society, power, class, the secular, and progress. The five oppositions have a common source in the historic conflict between tradition and modernity. Loosely borrowing from Siebers’s account of Badiou in this paper, we might say it was the event of modernity, rupturing tradition, which revealed the fundamental truth to which the institutional practice of sociology authentically responds.

On what basis did Nisbet select his five ideas? He argued that the unit-ideas that constitute an intellectual discipline must meet four criteria (Nisbet 1996: 5–6). First, they have generality (wide occurrence, not limited to a single author or school of thought); second, they have continuity (developed through the whole period of the discipline’s emergence); third, they are distinctive (significantly differentiate the discipline from other disciplines); and fourth, they are ideas in the full sense (rich perspectives revealing important aspects of the world, rather than merely technical concepts).
A critique of Nisbet’s project might begin by questioning the history of ideas as a specific approach to intellectual history, and might continue by questioning whether the discipline of sociology is more accurately distinguished by one core tradition or several competing traditions, or indeed whether it has any distinct coherence at all. Setting those questions aside, it is still useful to ask how some adapted version of Nisbet’s approach might apply to the history of a communication discipline that has not yet fully emerged. From within that nebulous formation it is perhaps easier for us to see that Nisbet’s account of the sociological tradition was not only a retrospective interpretation, much less an empirical description of disciplinary history. It was, rather, a call to action to recover an authentic response to the event of modernity in the praxis of sociology. Similarly, our own relation to communication history is perhaps best understood as a struggle to respond authentically to the truth of that indefinable event, a rupture in modernity, which is glossed by terms like ‘the communication revolution’ – with the Sisyphean task of constructing an intellectual core as a constitutive element of that practical struggle (cf. Craig 2008).

That is one way of describing the historical situation to which my proposal of a constitutive metamodel for communication theory was intended to respond (Craig 1999). As communication became a more urgent problem in the world, it was interpreted through various intellectual traditions oriented to different practical interests. The task of communication theory is to respond to the problem of communication in society, in part by practising fidelity to what is authentically true, or at least useful, in those various interpretations. With Nisbet in mind, one is tempted to see the problem of communication as a conflict between modernity and postmodernity, just as the problem of society for Nisbet was the conflict between tradition and modernity. The opposition of community–society transforms into something like society–network, and so on for the other core ideas. But such an analysis of the problem of communication, however useful it might be (García-Jiménez uses the society–network pair in this paper) would restrict us to the sociocultural tradition.

What are the unit-ideas of communication? García-Jimenez turns to Nisbet for a remedy to the endless pluralism of the constitutive metamodel. To define a discipline of communication we need to overcome the multiplicity of traditions by finding core ideas that have generality across traditions, continuity through the history of communication’s disciplinary emergence, distinctiveness from other disciplines, and sufficient richness of insight. Her invitation to the dialogue that continues in this forum proposed two such ideas: Technologically Mediated Communication and Direct Interpersonal Interaction. That was a good start, but the dialogue reveals interesting complications.

Simonson’s paper on pragmatism and rhetoric alludes to something that would seem to qualify as a third core idea of the communication discipline: Practical Art. Although this idea has been central in the rhetorical tradition, it extends across traditions and derives meaning in opposition to modernist notions of method or structure, an opposition expressed, for example, in theories of pragmatics in the semiotic tradition, philosophical hermeneutics in the phenomenological tradition, radical constructivism in the cybernetic tradition, and ethnomethodology and practice theory in the sociocultural tradition. The centrality of discourse and praxis in all of these projects provides evidence for the claim that the twentieth century was a rhetorical century. It was indeed a rhetorical century, but was it any less a cybernetic century, a semiotic century, a critical century, or a dialogic (or nostalgic for dialogue) century? Of course, it was all of those things, and more. Generally, it was a communication century.
in which rhetoric flourished anew as one of several broad ways of understanding communication problems and practices.

As Simonson shows, rhetoric has contributed to the pragmatist tradition a basis for constructing a pluralistic epistemology or what McKeon called an architectonic art, a practical art of interpreting social and intellectual problems from the perspectives of multiple disciplines. Simonson correctly points out that my constitutive metamodel, concerned with multiple traditions of one discipline, has a more limited scope than the universal architectonics of Peirce or McKeon. On the other hand, even though the metamodel itself is a pragmatist project, pragmatism is only one of eight traditions in the metamodel (and rhetoric is a second), and so these pragmatic-rhetorical architectonic schemes (including the metamodel itself) are subject to critique from multiple other traditions in the metamodel (Craig 2007). Phenomenology, for example, tends to be wary of pragmatism’s (and rhetoric’s) tendency to reduce practical arts to technical schemes that substitute pre-structured categories for an authentic encounter with the Other.

Technologically Mediated Communication is surely a core idea, as García-Jiménez illustrates by showing the parallel roles this idea has played in functionalist sociocultural and critical theories of mass media. Both traditions saw the mass media as a conservative force in society but they oriented to this problem in different ways. Direct Interpersonal Interaction, another likely core idea, also has a role in both traditions, either as personal influence which can limit media influence or as an ideal of authentic communication in contrast to the alienated media environment. The transition from mass society to network society, as García-Jiménez points out, can be seen as progressive insofar as social media reduce the gap between TMC and DII, diffusing power and allowing more authentic mediated interactions.

TMC and DII seem to operate like one of Nisbet’s oppositional pairs, but it seems less clear which one should be privileged as a core idea in contrast to the other. In Nisbet’s community–society pair, community is normatively valorized in contrast to the cold impersonality of society. DII would seem to have a parallel role vis-à-vis TMC in communication theory, where DII is normatively valorized in contrast to the spatiotemporal separation of persons inherent in technological mediation. Peters (1999), however, reverses this relation, arguing that all communication traverses spatiotemporal gaps, so mediated dissemination is preferable to dialogue (DII) as a normative model of communication. DII appeals to a nostalgic myth of spiritual communion of which Peters is critical. Nisbet’s normative elevation of community over society would seem to face a similar problem.

However, the ethical ideal of an authentic encounter in communication is not easily dismissed. Siebers introduces a new approach to this problematic from Alain Badiou’s philosophy of the event. For Badiou, an encounter with truth involves a rupture in the fabric of the known that is initially incommunicable. This does not refer to the myth of spiritual communion in dialogue that Peters criticizes, and does not necessarily involve DII at all. Indeed, in its aspect of material non-contingency, if I understand Siebers’s account of Badiou correctly, a personal encounter with communication as a social force would be more likely than a personal interaction with another individual to have the status of an event, although Siebers suggests that the latter is also possible. Is this new approach to authenticity in communication best understood as a further development of the phenomenological tradition, or does it point the way to a new tradition? A slightly different question suggested by Siebers is whether something like undecidability or incommunicability should be regarded...
as yet another core idea of the communication discipline. This also is a question worthy of exploration in the dialogue that will continue beyond this paper.

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**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Peter Simonson, Ph.D.; Associate Professor, Department of Communication, University of Colorado, Boulder (U.S.).

E-mail: peter.simonson@colorado.edu

Leonarda García-Jiménez, Ph.D.; Associate Professor, Department of Communication, State University of Murcia (Spain).

E-mail: leonardajg@um.es

Dr Johan Siebers; Associate Professor, Division of English Language, Linguistics, Literature and Culture, University of Central Lancashire (U.K.).

E-mail: jisiebers@uclan.ac.uk
Prof. Robert T. Craig; Professor of Communication, University of Colorado, Boulder (U.S.).

E-mail: robert.craig@colorado.edu

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NOTES

1. The rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt against dictatorial regimes at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 highlighted once again the important social role of Technologically Mediated Communication. Social media were a useful tool for organizing protests and spreading the information in an international level. The Internet was not the solution, but ‘an amplifier for all aspects of the conflict’ (Siegel 2011). Social networking was a catalyst and a useful tool for the mobilization of protests and for amplifying the conflict over the world.

2. For an outline of some of the direction in which some of the answers may be found, see Johan Siebers (2010).