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## Communication Theory as a Field

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*This essay reconstructs communication theory as a dialogical-dialectical field according to two principles: the constitutive model of communication as a metamodel and theory as metadiscursive practice. The essay argues that all communication theories are mutually relevant when addressed to a practical lifeworld in which “communication” is already a richly meaningful term. Each tradition of communication theory derives from and appeals rhetorically to certain commonplace beliefs about communication while challenging other beliefs. The complementarities and tensions among traditions generate a theoretical metadiscourse that intersects with and potentially informs the ongoing practical metadiscourse in society. In a tentative scheme of the field, rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, socio-psychological, sociocultural, and critical traditions of communication theory are distinguished by characteristic ways of defining communication and problems of communication, metadiscursive vocabularies, and metadiscursive commonplaces that they appeal to and challenge. Topoi for argumentation across traditions are suggested and implications for theoretical work and disciplinary practice in the field are considered.*

Communication theory is enormously rich in the range of ideas that fall within its nominal scope, and new theoretical work on communication has recently been flourishing.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, despite the ancient roots and growing profusion of theories about communication, I argue that communication theory as an identifiable field of study does not yet exist.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than addressing a field of theory, we appear to be operating primarily in separate domains. Books and articles on communication theory seldom mention other works on communication theory except within narrow (inter)disciplinary specialties and schools of thought.<sup>3</sup> Except within these little groups, communication theorists apparently neither agree nor disagree about much of anything. There is no canon of general theory to which they all refer. There are no common goals that

unite them, no contentious issues that divide them. For the most part, they simply ignore each other.<sup>4</sup>

College courses in communication theory are increasingly offered at all levels, and numerous textbooks are being published. However, a closer look at their contents only further demonstrates that, although there exist many theories of communication—indeed, way too many different theories to teach effectively in any one course—there is no consensus on communication theory as a *field*.

Anderson (1996) analyzed the contents of seven communication theory textbooks and identified 249 distinct “theories,” 195 of which appeared in only one of the seven books. That is, just 22% of the theories appeared in more than one of the seven books, and only 18 of the 249 theories (7%) were included in more than three books. If communication theory were really a field, it seems likely that more than half of the introductory textbooks would agree on something more than 7% of the field’s essential contents. The conclusion that communication theory is not yet a coherent field of study seems inescapable.<sup>5</sup>

Although communication theory is not yet a coherent field, I believe it can and should become one. A field will emerge to the extent that we increasingly engage as communication theorists with socially important goals, questions, and controversies that cut across the various disciplinary traditions, substantive specialties, methodologies, and schools of thought that presently divide us.

In this essay I argue that all communication theories are relevant to a common practical lifeworld in which *communication* is already a richly meaningful term. Communication theory, in this view, is a coherent field of metadiscursive practice, a field of discourse about discourse with implications for the practice of communication. The various traditions of communication theory each offer distinct ways of conceptualizing and discussing communication problems and practices. These ways derive from and appeal to certain commonplace beliefs about communication while problematizing other beliefs. It is in the dialogue among these traditions that communication theory can fully engage with the ongoing practical discourse (or metadiscourse) about communication in society (Craig, 1989; Craig & Tracy, 1995).

Succeeding sections of the essay develop the following points:

1. Communication theory has not yet emerged as a coherent field of study because communication theorists have not yet found a way beyond the disabling disciplinary practices that separate them.
2. The potential of communication theory as a field can best be realized, however, not in a unified theory of communication but in a dialogical-dialectical disciplinary matrix, a commonly understood (though always contestable) set of assumptions that would enable productive argumentation across the diverse traditions of communication theory.

3. A disciplinary matrix can be developed using a constitutive metamodel of communication that opens up a conceptual space in which diverse first-order models can interact, and a conception of communication theory as theoretical metadiscourse productively engaged with the practical metadiscourse of everyday life.

4. Based on these principles, a tentative reconstruction of the multidisciplinary traditions of communication theory can appear as seven alternative vocabularies for theorizing communication as a social practice.

In conclusion, I suggest applications and extensions of the matrix and implications for disciplinary practice in the field of communication theory.

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### **Roots of Incoherence**

The incoherence of communication theory as a field can be explained by communication theory's multidisciplinary origins and by the particular ways in which communication scholars have used and too often misused the intellectual fruits that continue to pour from this multidisciplinary horn of plenty.

### **Multidisciplinary Origins**

One of the most interesting facts about communication theory is that it has cropped up more or less independently in so many different academic disciplines. Littlejohn (1982), in what may be still the closest thing we have to a comprehensive schematic overview, traced contributions to communication theory from disciplines as diverse as literature, mathematics and engineering, sociology, and psychology.<sup>6</sup> Budd and Ruben's (1972) anthology of communication theory included chapters representing 24 disciplinary approaches in alphabetical order from anthropology to zoology.

The communication discipline initially tried to set itself up as a kind of interdisciplinary clearinghouse for all of these disciplinary approaches. This spirit of interdisciplinarity is still with us and deserves to be cultivated as one of our more meritorious qualities. The incorporation of so many different disciplinary approaches has made it very hard, however, to envision communication theory as a coherent field. What, if anything, do all of these approaches have to do with each other? Developed within various disciplines to address various intellectual problems, they are, in Kuhn's (1970) sense of the term, incommensurable: They neither agree nor disagree about anything, but effectively bypass each other because they conceive of their nominally shared topic, communication, in such fundamentally different ways.

Dance (1970) reviewed 95 published definitions of communication that had appeared in the 50s and 60s.<sup>7</sup> He concluded that the definitions differed in so many ways (he distinguished 15 conceptual compo-

nents) that communication might better be theorized as a “family” of related concepts rather than a unitary concept in order to avoid “dissension, academic sniping, and theoretical divisiveness” (p. 210). Working in a positivist tradition that at least held the concept of theory stable, Dance perhaps underestimated the difficulty of integrating definitions derived eclectically from disciplines with incommensurable intellectual agendas, now often involving radically different conceptions of “theory” (Craig, 1993). Given a plethora of definitions of communication and the difficulty of integrating or deciding among them in any satisfactory way, it became conventional wisdom among communication scholars (e.g. Fisher, 1978; Murphy, 1991) that to argue over definitions of communication was pointless. Over what, then, is it *not* pointless for communication theorists to argue if not the primary concept that constitutes their common field of study?

### **From Sterile Eclecticism to Productive Fragmentation**

According to Peters (1986), communication research has been intellectually impoverished in part because of the peculiar way in which the discipline was institutionalized in U.S. universities. The term communication, he argues, was used by Wilbur Schramm and others as an institutional legitimizing device in ways that precluded any coherent definition of “the field, its intellectual focus, and its mission” (p. 527). In establishing itself under the banner of communication, the discipline staked an academic claim to the entire field of communication theory and research—a very big claim indeed, since communication had already been widely studied and theorized. Peters writes that communication research became “an intellectual Taiwan—claiming to be all of China when, in fact, it was isolated on a small island” (p. 545). Perhaps the most egregious case involved Shannon’s mathematical theory of information (Shannon & Weaver, 1948), which communication scholars touted as evidence of their field’s potential scientific status even though they had nothing whatever to do with creating it, often poorly understood it, and seldom found any real use for it in their research. The sterile eclecticism of communication theory in this mode is evident in the cataloguing traditions still appearing in most of our recent communication theory textbooks. The “field” of communication theory came to resemble in some ways a pest-control device called the Roach Motel that used to be advertised on TV: Theories check in, but they never check out. Communication scholars seized upon every idea about communication, whatever its provenance, but accomplished little with most of them—entombed them, you might say, after removing them from the disciplinary environments in which they had thrived and were capable of propagating. Communication scholars contributed few original ideas of their own.

Peters (1986) also points to a related phenomenon that I may inter-

pret somewhat differently than he. Leading communication scholars were quite aware of the problem I am calling “sterile eclecticism” and sought to overcome it by developing systematic, theoretically based research programs. Since most of their theories and research paradigms were borrowed from other disciplines, this meant, in effect, initiating communication research programs closely based upon research programs in those other disciplines, so that much political communication research, for example, was little more than “political science as practiced in the field of communication” (Peters, 1986, p. 548). Similarly, much interpersonal communication research was, and continues to be, little more than experimental social psychology as practiced in the field of communication.

Interdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinary borrowing are, of course, useful practices in themselves and ought to be encouraged in order to mitigate the fragmentation of knowledge among disciplines. The problem, as Peters (1986) suggested, is that mostly borrowed goods were leveraged to sustain institutional claims to disciplinary status without articulating any coherent, distinctive focus or mission for this putative communication discipline.

Communication research became productive by importing fragments of various other disciplines into its own culture, but the fragments did not and could never, in the ways they were used, cohere as a self-sustaining whole that was something more than the sum of its parts. This condition further explains why communication theory has not yet emerged as a coherent field. Each of the fragments of communication research has been productive within its own domain, hence my term “productive fragmentation.” As long as the research discipline is thus fragmented, the textbooks will continue to be mired in sterile eclecticism and there will continue to be more and more communication theories but still no *field* of communication theory.

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## **Reconstructing Communication Theory as a Field**

### **The Goal: Dialogical-Dialectical Coherence**

In considering remedies for incoherence, the goal should not be some chimerical, unified theory of communication just over the rainbow. Such a unified theory will always be out of reach, and we probably should not want one even if it were attainable. No active field of inquiry has a fully unified theory. A perfectly coherent field would be a static field, a dead field, but the practice of communication itself is very much alive and endlessly evolving in a worldly scene of contingency and conflict. Communication theory, the theory of this practice, in all likelihood will never, therefore, achieve a final, unified form. The goal, indeed, should be the very condition that Dance (1970) was so keen to avoid: theoretical di-

versity, argument, debate, even at the cost of occasional lapses into academic sniping. The goal should not be a state in which we have nothing to argue about, but one in which we better understand that we all have something very important to argue about.

If, however, we should not chase after the chimera of a unified theory, neither should we be distracted from the path of inquiry by the red herring of antidisciplinarity. Productive theoretical arguments most readily occur within an interpretive community sustained by a disciplinary matrix, a background of assumptions shared in common. Disciplinarity, however, does not require that diversity and interdisciplinarity be suppressed.<sup>8</sup> To be a discipline means only, at a minimum, that many of us agree that we disagree about certain matters that are consequential in certain ways and therefore worth discussing. A discipline in this sense is nothing more nor less than “a conversational community with a tradition of argumentation” (Shotter, 1997).

The goal, in short, should be dialogical-dialectical coherence: a common awareness of certain complementarities and tensions among different types of communication theory, so it is commonly understood that these different types of theory cannot legitimately develop in total isolation from each other but must engage each other in argument. My purpose here is to explore how communication theory might be reconstructed within a practical discipline to reveal such complementarities and tensions and thereby constitute a coherent field. For this purpose, I will propose a tentative theoretical matrix constructed on the basis of two principles. The first of these principles derives from the “constitutive” model of communication that has been featured in other recent efforts to conceptualize a field of communication theory but puts the constitutive model through a reflexive turn from which it emerges looking quite different.

### **Principle One: The Constitutive Model of Communication as Metamodel**

Although the earlier debate over defining communication largely ceased after Dance (1970), the concept of communication has once again, roughly since the late 1980s, become a subject of serious discussion among communication theorists. Amidst a general flourishing of communication theory, this renewed focus on the concept of communication reflects a growing conviction among at least some scholars that communication theory *can* become a coherent field of inquiry, a field of central importance to social thought. In conceptualizing communication, we construct, in effect, a “communicational” perspective on social reality and so define the scope and purpose of a communication discipline distinct from other social disciplines.<sup>9</sup>

Among the most interesting of these field-defining proposals have been several versions of a constitutive, or ritual, model of communication.

Typically, the proposed model is defined largely by contrast with its dialectical opposite, a transmission, or informational, model of communication that, it is claimed, continues to dominate lay and much academic thought (Carey, 1989; Cronen, 1995; Deetz, 1994; Pearce, 1989; Peters, 1989; Rothenbuhler, 1998; Shepherd, 1993; Sigman, 1992, 1995b). According to the conventional transmission concept, communication is a process of sending and receiving messages or transferring information from one mind to another.

This transmission model of communication has come under heavy attack in recent years. Peters (1989) has traced its origins to 18th-century empiricism, with its individualistic and ultimately solipsistic assumptions (also see Taylor, 1992, 1997). Carey (1989), Deetz (1994), Pearce (1989), and Shepherd (1993), among others, have variously argued that the transmission model is philosophically flawed, fraught with paradox, and ideologically backward, and that it should at least be supplemented, if not entirely supplanted, by a model that conceptualizes communication as a constitutive process that produces and reproduces shared meaning. The constitutive model offers the discipline of communication a focus, a central intellectual role, and a cultural mission (i.e., to critique cultural manifestations of the transmission model).

Several important themes run through this literature. One is that ideas about communication have evolved historically and are best understood in a broader context of cultural and intellectual history. A second is that communication theories are reflexive: Formal theories, that is, often draw from ordinary, culturally based ways of thinking about communication but these theories, once formulated, can also influence, either to reinforce or to change, everyday thinking and practice. The relationship between theory and culture is thus reflexive, or mutually constitutive. Communication theories help to create the very phenomena that they purport to explain (Carey, 1989; Krippendorff, 1997).

This leads to a third theme, which is that theories of communication, because they are historically and culturally rooted and reflexive, have practical implications, including political ones. Because they influence society, theories always serve some interests—often, unsurprisingly, interests of the more privileged and powerful strata of society—more than others. For example, a transmission model of communication can serve the interests of technical experts, such as scientists and engineers, when it is used to reinforce cultural beliefs that highlight the value of experts as reliable sources of information.

A fourth theme is that the communication can be a legitimate intellectual discipline, but only if it embraces a communicational perspective on social reality that is radically distinct from, but at least equal in status to, such established disciplinary perspectives as those of psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, and so on. Each of these disciplinary per-

spectives has its own ways of explaining certain aspects of communication. Psychological theories explain, for example, the cognitive processes by which people are able to create messages (Berger, 1997). A communicational perspective, however, completely turns the explanatory tables. Communication, from a communicational perspective, is not a secondary phenomenon that can be explained by antecedent psychological, sociological, cultural, or economic factors; rather, communication itself is the primary, constitutive social process that explains all these other factors. Theories about communication from other disciplinary perspectives are not, in the strict sense, within the field of communication theory because they are not based on a communicational perspective. All genuine communication theory acknowledges the consequentiality of communication (Sigman, 1995b); it acknowledges communication itself as a fundamental mode of explanation (Deetz, 1994).<sup>10</sup>

Deetz points out that new disciplines (in the sense of fundamentally new modes of explanation) “arise when existing modes of explanation fail to provide compelling guidance for responses to a central set of new social issues” (1994, p. 568). Today, the central social issues have to do with who participates in what ways in the social processes that construct personal identities, the social order, and codes of communication. Against the traditional informational view of communication that takes these elements for granted as a fixed framework that must be in place in order for communication to occur, Deetz endorses an emerging “communication perspective” that focuses on “describing how the inner world, outer world, social relations, and means of expression are reciprocally constituted with the interactional process as its own best explanation” (1994, p. 577).

Especially noteworthy is that the arguments advanced in support of a constitutive model of communication, as the passages just quoted from Deetz (1994) illustrate, most often are not purely theoretical. The changing social situation in which communication is theorized, it is said, calls for new ways of thinking about communication. The constitutive model is presented as a practical response to contemporary social problems, such as those arising from the erosion of the cultural foundations of traditional ideas and institutions, increasing cultural diversity and interdependence, and widespread demands for democratic participation in the construction of social reality. Just as a transmission model can be used to bolster the authority of technical experts, a constitutive model can hopefully serve the causes of freedom, toleration, and democracy.<sup>11</sup>

Although I largely agree with these arguments for a constitutive model of communication, I favor a pragmatic interpretation that does not necessarily reject other models, such as the transmission model, for practical purposes. That is, I take the constitutive model to be a metamodel that opens up a conceptual space in which many different theoretical

models of communication can interact. Logically, a first-order model of communication is a perspective on communication that highlights certain aspects of the process. Thus, for example, a transmission model pictures communication as a process in which messages flow from sources to receivers. A second-order model, or metamodel, is a perspective on models that highlights certain aspects of models. A constitutive metamodel of communication pictures models of communication as different ways of constituting the communication process symbolically for particular purposes. The failure to distinguish logically between first-order models of communication and the constitutive metamodel is, I believe, a category mistake that produces at least two sorts of confusion.

First, a paradox lurks in the dialectical opposition between constitutive and transmission models. Since the constitutive model typically denies that any concept has a true essence except as constituted within the communication process, to assert that the constitutive model is the “true” model of communication would seem self-contradictory. Despite the impression one might get from a superficial reading of the literature, the definition of communication is not a binary choice between two competing models, transmission versus constitutive, which in fact is no choice at all because the transmission model, as usually presented, is scarcely more than a straw figure set up to represent a simplistic view. A transmission model, regarded as one way of constituting communication symbolically for pragmatic purposes, is perfectly consistent with the constitutive model. That is, the constitutive model does not tell us what communication really is, but rather implies that communication can be constituted symbolically (in and through communication, of course) in many different ways, including (why not, if it is useful to do so for some purposes?) as a transmission process.<sup>12</sup> Transmission-like notions of communication, whatever their philosophical flaws, continue to have cultural currency.<sup>13</sup> We may find, moreover, upon critical reflection, that there are often good reasons for using a transmission model: that it can be useful to distinguish pragmatically between communication sources and receivers, to map the flow of information through systems, or to think of messages as containers of meaning or of communication as an intentional act performed in order to achieve some anticipated outcome. Transmission models can be defended, for example, on grounds that they cultivate a particular kind of alertness to the diversity and relativity of perspectives and the ever-present dangers of distortion and misunderstanding in communication.<sup>14</sup>

Second, and more generally, the constitutive model, unless clearly distinguished as a metamodel, may tend to confuse communication itself with communication as theorized within certain limited traditions and thus, by excluding other useful traditions, unduly restrict the field of communication theory. The constitutive model is perhaps most easily

confused with what I will define later in this essay as a sociocultural tradition of communication theory. In this tradition, communication is theorized as a process that produces and reproduces—and in that way constitutes—social order. Confusing the constitutive metamodel with this first-order sociocultural model of communication can lead to the false impression that other traditions of communication theory, such as those I will call the cybernetic and sociopsychological traditions, are not genuine communication theories because they do not take a communicational perspective on social reality. To the contrary, as I will show, these other traditions can be reconstructed according to the constitutive metamodel as alternative types of communication explanations, not just explanations of communication based on noncommunication factors. In short, there are many different ways in which communication can be theorized, or constituted symbolically, within a constitutive metamodel. The sociocultural tradition of communication theory is just one of those ways.

The mere fact that communication can be theorized in various ways within a constitutive metamodel does not, however, give us any good reason to do so, nor does it give us any good reason to expect that a coherent field of communication theory would result from such a proliferation of theories. Does this “pragmatic” line of thinking—the more theories the better—put us right back in the same old pickle of sterile eclecticism or, at best, productive fragmentation? I shall argue that communication theory in all its open-ended diversity can be a coherent field, and useful too, if we understand it in a certain way as metadiscourse, a discourse about discourse, in the context of a practical discipline. This is the second principle for constructing a dialogical-dialectical disciplinary matrix.

### **Principle Two: Communication Theory as Metadiscourse**

My reading of Taylor (1992) sparked a key insight that led to this essay on communication theory as a field. In a critique of language theory from Locke to the present, Taylor “represents the technical practice of theorizing language, interpretation, communication, and understanding . . . as derived from . . . our ordinary, everyday practices of talking about what we say and do with language” (1992, p. 10). Formal linguistic theory, he claims, can be, and in effect has been, derived by transforming commonplaces of *practical metadiscourse*—such as the commonplace belief that people ordinarily understand each other’s utterances—into theoretical axioms or empirical hypotheses. Each language theory establishes its plausibility by appealing rhetorically to the taken-for-granted validity of some of these metadiscursive commonplaces while subjecting others to skeptical challenge. As each language theory questions metadiscursive commonplaces that other theories take for granted,

language theory as a whole becomes an *intellectual metadiscourse* structured as a closed, self-referential game. The only way out of this self-contained rhetorical game of intellectual metadiscourse, Taylor (1992) suggests, is to set aside the pseudoproblem on which it is based—that of explaining how communication is possible—and to turn instead to the empirical study of practical metadiscourse—how communication is reflexively accomplished in practice.

Practical metadiscourse is intrinsic to communicative practice. That is, communication is not only something we do, but also something we refer to reflexively in ways that are practically entwined with our doing of it. When Ann says to Bill, for example, “you can’t possibly know what I’m talking about,” Ann appeals, in the form of a metadiscursive remark, to certain commonplace beliefs about meaning and reference (such as the belief that true understanding comes only from personal experience), probably in order to undermine some assertion of Bill’s. Practical discourse abounds in such metadiscursive commonplaces, which are important in everyday life for all sorts of pragmatic functions.

Taylor’s (1992) deconstruction of language theory sparked the insight that *all* communication theory, not just language theory, is a kind of metadiscourse, a way of talking about talk, that derives much of its plausibility and interest by appealing rhetorically to commonplaces of everyday practical metadiscourse. Sociopsychological trait theories of communication, for example, seem plausible because they appeal to the commonplace notion that people’s communication styles reflect their personalities. *Communication apprehension* theory is just a more sophisticated version of everyday metadiscourse about shyness, as in “she was afraid to talk to him because she’s so shy.”

My working assumption, then, to paraphrase Taylor (1992), is that the technical practice of communication theory largely derives from our ordinary, everyday practices of talking about communication, and my analysis of the broader, more heterogeneous field of communication theory follows Taylor’s narrower, more tightly structured analysis of language theory in some respects. There is, however, an important difference. Whereas Taylor (1992) portrays language theory as a closed, self-referential game, completely divorced from the pragmatic functions that animate practical metadiscourse, I envision communication theory as an open field of discourse engaged with the problems of communication as a social practice, a theoretical metadiscourse that emerges from, extends, and informs practical metadiscourse.

In this vision, our task is not to *deconstruct* communication theory. (What would be the point? It’s already a mess.) Rather, we must *reconstruct* communication theory as a theoretical metadiscourse engaged in dialogue with the practical metadiscourse of everyday life. This conception of theoretical metadiscourse embraces the implications and com-

mitments that flow from a constitutive metamodel of communication. It acknowledges the reflexivity of communication theory and our consequent obligation, as theorists of communication, to address our theoretical work to the cultural situation that has given rise to our discipline. It acknowledges, in other words, the potential for communication theory to assist in the cultivation of communication as a social practice, and so for communication to develop as a practical discipline (Craig, 1989, 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Craig & Tracy, 1995).

In a practical discipline of communication, theory is designed to provide conceptual resources for reflecting on communication problems. It does this by theorizing (conceptually reconstructing) communicative practices within relatively abstract, explicitly reasoned, normative idealizations of communication (Craig, 1996b; Craig & Tracy, 1995). Communication can be theorized, of course, from many different perspectives, so the field of communication theory becomes a forum in which to discuss the relative merits of alternative practical theories. This discussion about alternative theories constitutes what I am calling theoretical metadiscourse.

Communication has the potential to be a practical discipline in the first place because “communication” is already a richly meaningful concept in our lifeworld. If ours is a culture in which we tend to think that all problems are fundamentally problems of communication (McKeon, 1957), in which we often find that we need to “sit down and talk” in order “to work out problems” in our relationships (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981), in which we ritually avow that communication is the only tie that can hold together a diverse society across the vast spatial and cultural gaps that divide us (Carey, 1989), then communication is already a topic much discussed throughout society, and everyone already knows that communication is important and worth studying in order to improve. Because communication is already so much talked about in society, communication theory can be constructed inductively through critical studies of everyday practice, in part by transcribing and theoretically reconstructing the “situated ideals” articulated by people themselves in their everyday metadiscourse. This critical-inductive way of constructing communication theory has been explored in earlier work on “grounded practical theory” (Craig & Tracy, 1995).

Communication also has the potential to be a practical discipline in part because communication is already an important theoretical category within a wide range of established disciplines, from which we can derive a rich array of conceptual resources for reflecting on the practice of communication. These already-established traditions of communication theory offer distinct, alternative vocabularies that can be critically reconstructed as alternative ways of conceptualizing communication problems and practices. The rich intellectual heritage of communication

theory constitutes, then, a second starting point for constructing a field of communication theory. Communication theory can be constructed deductively, starting from theory, as well as inductively, starting from practice. This critical-deductive way of constructing communication theory is the one we are exploring in the present essay.

Although theoretical ideas about communication have been developed in various disciplines with incommensurable intellectual agendas, it is nevertheless a reasonable working assumption that every one of those ideas is potentially relevant to practice. One interesting, although admittedly speculative, reason for thinking so is that communication may have been theorized in all these different disciplines during the 20th century in part just *because* it has become such a culturally important category of social practice. This assumption is consistent with the reflexivity, or mutual influence, between communication theory and cultural practice as suggested by Carey (1989), Deetz (1994), and other writers. From a rhetorical perspective, one way for an academic discipline to legitimize itself in the culture is to establish its social relevance by showing that it has something interesting to say about culturally salient themes and practical problems—such as, in our culture, communication.

If it is true that the widespread theorization of communication in so many different academic disciplines has arisen in part from an impulse toward practical relevance, then the multidisciplinary heritage of communication theory is ready-made, to some extent, for the purposes of a practical discipline. My goal in the remainder of this essay is to show how the potential practical relevance of all communication theories, whatever their disciplinary origins, can be exploited to construct a field, a common ground, a common (meta)discursive space, in which all communication theories can interact productively with each other and, through the medium of practical metadiscourse, with communication practice.

My method for reconstructing the traditions of communication theory to highlight their practical relevance loosely follows Taylor (1992). I assume that theoretical metadiscourse (that is, communication theory) derives from and theorizes practical metadiscourse (everyday ways of talking about communication), and in so doing both (a) appeals rhetorically to certain metadiscursive commonplaces, which is what makes a theory seem plausible and commonsensical from a lay point of view, and (b) skeptically challenges other metadiscursive commonplaces, which is what makes a theory seem interesting, insightful, or maybe absurdly nonsensical from a lay point of view. This combination of plausibility and interestingness constitutes the presumptive practical relevance of a theory. Because different theories turn out to be relevant in significantly different and often conflicting ways, theoretical metadiscourse turns back

on itself to debate the differences and thereby constitutes itself as a dialogical-dialectical field. Our present task, then, is to jump-start that self-reflexive process in the field of communication theory.

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### **A Sketch of the Field: Seven Traditions**

So far, I have argued that communication theory is not yet a coherent field but has the potential to become a dialogical-dialectical field based on two principles: (a) a constitutive metamodel of communication, and (b) a conception of communication theory as metadiscursive practice within a practical discipline. To see where this approach might take us, I will sketch seven reconstructed traditions of communication theory, arrayed in a matrix that highlights practically relevant complementarities and tensions among them.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the seven traditional standpoints, which are further discussed in the following pages. In Table 1, each tradition is identified by its characteristic definition of communication and its associated definition of communication problems, metadiscursive vocabulary, taken-for-granted metadiscursive commonplaces that make the tradition plausible, and metadiscursive commonplaces that the tradition interestingly reinterprets or challenges.

Table 2 continues the analysis by suggesting *topoi* (that is, dialectical commonplaces or stock arguments) for argumentation across the traditions. The purpose of Table 2 is to indicate distinctive critical objections that each tradition would typically raise against each tradition's typical way of analyzing communication practices.<sup>15</sup>

The traditions are briefly discussed in the following sections. The discussions generally follow and supplement Tables 1 and 2, but without commenting in detail on each cell. In order to illustrate the traditions, including blends of different traditions, I do cite recent literature on communication theory as appropriate. Without question, these are instrumental constructions rather than essential categories, but they represent recognizable communities of scholarship. Although I attempted to be inclusive in selecting and defining the traditions, I have made decisions that undoubtedly reflect my own intellectual biases and limitations. Other scholars are invited to point these out.

The contents of the seven traditions, I hope, will resonate with any reader who is moderately well acquainted with the broad range of communication theory. Several of the seven correspond fairly closely to certain chapters in Littlejohn's (1996b) influential textbook, for example. Despite the familiarity of the contents, however (these are, after all, *traditions* of communication theory), the structure of the matrix differs radically from conventional ways of dividing up the field. Communication theories traditionally have been classified by disciplinary origin (e.g.,

|  | Rhetorical  | Semiotic   | Phenomenological  | Cybernetic   | Sociopsychological   |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|
| Communication theorized as:                                      | The practical art of discourse  | Intersubjective mediation by signs   | Experience of otherness; dialogue   | Information processing   | Expression, interaction, & influence   |
| Problems of communication theorized as:                          | Social exigency requiring collective deliberation and judgment                                      | Misunderstanding or gap between subjective viewpoints                                    | Absence of, or failure to sustain, authentic human relationship                                 | Noise; overload; underload; a malfunction or "bug" in a system                                   | Situation requiring manipulation of causes of behavior to achieve specified outcomes                       |
| Metadiscursive vocabulary such as:                               | Art, method, communicator, audience, strategy, commonplace, logic, emotion                          | Sign, symbol, icon, index, meaning, referent, code, language, medium, (mis)understanding | Experience, self & other, dialogue, genuineness, supportiveness, openness                       | Source, receiver, signal, information, noise, feedback, redundancy, network, function            | Behavior, variable, effect, personality, emotion, perception, cognition, attitude, interaction             |
| Plausible when appeals to metadiscursive commonplaces such as:   | Power of words; value of informed judgment; improvability of practice                               | Understanding requires common language; omnipresent danger of miscommunication           | All need human contact, should treat others as persons, respect differences, seek common ground | Identity of mind and brain; value of information and logic; complex systems can be unpredictable | Communication reflects personality; beliefs & feelings bias judgments; people in groups affect one another |
| Interesting when challenges metadiscursive commonplaces such as: | Mere words are not actions; appearance is not reality; style is not substance; opinion is not truth | Words have correct meanings & stand for thoughts; codes & media are neutral channels     | Communication is skill; the word is not the thing; facts are objective and values subjective    | Humans and machines differ; emotion is not logical; linear order of cause & effect               | Humans are rational beings; we know our own minds; we know what we see                                     |

|                              | Rhetorical   | Semiotic  | Phenomenological  | Cybernetic  | Sociopsychological  |
|------------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|
| Against rhetoric             | The art of rhetoric can be learned only by practice; theory merely distracts         | We do not use signs; rather they use us   | Strategic communication is inherently inauthentic & often counterproductive                   | Intervention in complex systems involves technical problems rhetoric fails to grasp | Rhetoric lacks good empirical evidence that its persuasive techniques actually work as intended           |
| Against semiotics            | All use of signs is rhetorical   | Lingue is a fiction; meaning & intersubjectivity are indeterminate                  | Lingue-parole & signifier-signified are false distinctions. Languaging constitutes world      | "Meaning" consists of functional relationships within dynamic information systems   | Semiotics fails to explain factors that influence the production & interpretation of messages             |
| Against phenomenology        | Authenticity is a dangerous myth; good communication must be artful, hence strategic | Self & other are semiotically determined subject positions & exist only in/as signs | Other's experience is not experienced directly but only as constituted in ego's consciousness | Phenomenological "experience" must occur in the brain as information processing     | Phenomenological introspection falsely assumes self-awareness of cognitive processes                      |
| Against cybernetics          | Practical reason cannot (or should not) be reduced to formal calculation             | Functionalist explanations ignore subtleties of sign systems                        | Functionalism fails to explain meaning as embodied, conscious experience                      | The observer must be included in the system, rendering it indeterminate             | Cybernetics is too rationalistic; e.g., it underestimates the role of emotion                             |
| Against sociopsychology      | Effects are situational and cannot be precisely predicted                            | Sociopsychological "effects" are internal properties of sign systems                | The subject-object dichotomy of sociopsychology must be transcended                           | Communication involves circular causation, not linear causation                     | Sociopsychological theories have limited predictive power, even in laboratory                             |
| Against sociocultural theory | Sociocultural rules, etc., are contexts & resources for rhetorical discourse         | Sociocultural rules, etc., are all systems of signs                                 | The social life-world has a phenomenological foundation                                       | The functional organization of any social system can be modeled formally            | Sociocultural theory is vague, untestable, ignores psychological processes that underlie all social order |
| Against critical theory      | Practical reason is based in particular situations, not universal principles         | There is nothing outside the text   | Critique is immanent in every authentic encounter with tradition                              | Self-organizing systems models account for social conflict & change                 | Critical theory confuses facts & values, imposes a dogmatic ideology                                      |

psychology, sociology, rhetoric), level of organization (e.g., interpersonal, organizational, mass), type of explanation (e.g., trait, cognitive, system-theoretic), or underlying epistemology (e.g. empiricist, interpretive, critical). By contrast, the scheme I am proposing divides the field according to underlying conceptions of communicative practice. An effect of this shift in perspective is that communication theories no longer bypass each other in their different paradigms or on their different levels. Communication theories suddenly now have something to agree and disagree about—and that “something” is communication, not epistemology.

### **The Rhetorical Tradition: Communication as a Practical Art of Discourse**

Formally speaking, rhetoric is the collaborative art of addressing and guiding decision and judgment—usually public judgment that cannot be decided by force or expertise. Rhetorical inquiry, more commonly known as the study of public communication, is one of the few areas of research that is still actively informed by its own traditions. . . . (Farrell, 1993, p. 1)

The primary source of ideas about communication prior to this century, dating back to ancient times, was rhetoric. (Littlejohn, 1996a, p. 117)

In the tradition of rhetorical theory that originated with the ancient Greek sophists and runs through a long and varied history down to the present, communication has typically been theorized as a *practical art of discourse*.<sup>16</sup> This way of theorizing communication is useful for explaining why our participation in discourse, especially public discourse, is important and how it occurs, and holds forth the possibility that the practice of communication can be cultivated and improved through critical study and education. Problems of communication in the rhetorical tradition are conceived as social exigencies that can be resolved through the artful use of discourse to persuade audiences (Bitzer, 1968).

Rhetorical theory seems plausible and useful because it appeals to certain commonplace beliefs about communication. We all know that rhetoric is a powerful force in society. Most will readily agree that in matters of opinion it is good to hear about different sides of a question before reaching our own judgment, so rhetoric seems to be basically necessary and useful, even though it is too often poorly done, annoying, or even seriously harmful. For such reasons, it is important for us to understand how rhetoric works and to cultivate our abilities as critical consumers as well as effective producers of rhetoric. We know that some people are better communicators than others, and that the best examples of rhetoric can rise to the level of great art. Since we know that communicators vary in wisdom and skill, and that skill, if not wisdom, can often be improved through instruction and practice, it is reasonable to think that people can become better communicators by learning and practicing methods of communication that can be invented or discovered through research and systematically taught. Moreover, once we

understand that public advocacy is just one of many areas of communicative practice, such as interpersonal conversation, news reporting, CD-ROM design, and so on, it becomes obvious that all communication can be theorized as practical art and studied in much the same ways as rhetoric has traditionally been studied. This is why it now comports with common sense to think of communication as a practical discipline.

If, however, the rhetorical tradition seems plausible and useful because it appeals to many commonplace beliefs about communication, it is also interesting because it challenges other commonplace beliefs and reveals some of the deepest paradoxes of communication. It challenges the commonplaces that mere words are less important than actions, that true knowledge is more than just a matter of opinion, and that telling the plain truth is something other than the strategic adaptation of a message to an audience. For over 2 millennia rhetorical theorists have disputed about the relative places of emotion and logic in persuasion, whether rhetoric is inherently good or bad or just a neutral tool, whether the art of rhetoric has any special subject matter of its own, and whether theory has any useful role to play in the improvement of practice. These are interesting questions—or can be made so by a skillful teacher—in part because they are deeply puzzling intellectually, and in part because they can be connected to real problems that all of us face in our everyday lives. We really should reflect, for example, on how we are swayed by the emotional appeals that pervade political and commercial advertising, and rhetorical theory provides a useful vocabulary with which to conceptualize and discuss this common experience.

### **The Semiotic Tradition: Communication as Intersubjective Mediation by Signs**

[S]emiotics has paid a great deal of attention to how people convey meanings and thus has developed a vocabulary we can borrow for our own uses. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993, p. xv)

Miscommunication . . . is the scandal that motivates the concept of communication. (Peters, 1989, p. 397)

Semiotics, the study of signs, like rhetoric, has ancient roots (Manetti, 1993), but semiotics as a distinct tradition of communication theory can be said to have originated in the language theory of John Locke (the much neglected Book III).<sup>17</sup> This tradition runs through Peirce and Saussure, whose seminal works founded two quite different disciplines of semiotics, and continues down to current theories of language, discourse, interpretation, nonverbal communication, culture, and media. In the semiotic tradition, communication is typically theorized as *intersubjective mediation by signs*. Communication theorized in this way explains and cultivates the use of language and other sign systems to mediate between different perspectives. Problems of communication in the semiotic tradition are primarily problems of (re)presentation and transmission of meaning, of gaps between subjectivities that can be

bridged, if only imperfectly, by the use of shared systems of signs.

Locke (1690/1979) argued that we cannot take it for granted that people ordinarily understand each other. Taylor (1992), as I mentioned earlier, shows how all language theories since Locke can be construed as a series of replies to Locke's skeptical argument against the commonplace assumption of intersubjective understanding. Semiotic theory now commonly asserts that signs construct their users (or "subject-positions"), that meanings are public and ultimately indeterminate, that understanding is a practical gesture rather than an intersubjective psychological state, and that codes and media of communication are not merely neutral structures or channels for the transmission of meanings, but have sign-like properties of their own (the code shapes the content and the medium itself becomes a message, or even *the* message [McLuhan, 1964]).

Semiotic communication theory seems plausible and practical when it appeals to the commonsense beliefs that communication is easiest when we share a common language, that words can mean different things to different people so miscommunication is a constant danger, that meanings are often conveyed indirectly or by subtle aspects of behavior that may go unnoticed, and that certain ideas are easier to express in certain media (a picture is worth a thousand words; email should not be used for delicate business negotiations). On the other hand, semiotics can seem interesting, insightful, or even absurdly implausible to ordinary people when it challenges other commonplace beliefs, such as that ideas exist in people's minds, that words have correct meanings, that meanings can be made explicit, that communication is a voluntary act, and that we use signs and media of communication as tools to represent and share our thoughts.

As distinct traditions within the field of communication theory, rhetoric and semiotics are closely akin in some ways and hybrids of the two are not uncommon (e.g., Burke, 1966; Kaufer & Carley, 1993). Rhetoric can be thought of as the branch of semiotics that studies the structures of language and argument that mediate between communicators and audiences. Semiotics also can be thought of as a particular theory of rhetoric that studies the resources available for conveying meanings in rhetorical messages.

Semiotics and rhetoric also have sharp differences, with important practical implications. Peters points out that "Locke understood communication not as a kind of speech, rhetoric, or discourse, but an alternative to them" (1989, p. 394). In modernist thought, rhetoric has often been cast as the enemy of communication. Communication for modernists is all about reason, truth, clarity, and understanding; rhetoric is all about traditionalism, artifice, obfuscation, and manipulation. Communication marks the new way of science and enlightenment; rhetoric, the old way of obscurantism and reaction.

In postmodernist thought, of course, all of this has largely been turned on its head. For poststructuralist semioticians all communication *is* rhetoric, if by rhetoric we mean uses of language for which reason, truth, clarity, and understanding can no longer be upheld as normative criteria. In the rhetorical tradition of communication theory, however, rhetoric typically means something quite different and arguably more useful (see above). It means communication designed to appeal to an audience and inform their judgment on important matters of opinion and decision. In short, the theoretical debate between rhetoric and semiotics is practically important because it is ultimately about the normative basis for our everyday use of concepts like judgment, meaning, and truth in practical metadiscourse.

### **The Phenomenological Tradition: Communication as the Experience of Otherness**

Phenomenological understanding of dialogue is not a theory imposed from above by some autocratic reason, but rather it is an exposition of the communicative process as it takes place in experience. (Pilotta & Mickunas, 1990, p. 81)

Communication thus implies noncomprehension, for I am most firmly placed in a situation of communication with the other when I recognize that someone has come to me but do not understand why and do not quite understand what he, she, or it says. (Chang, 1996, p. 225)

In the mainly 20th-century tradition of phenomenology that runs from Husserl through the existential and hermeneutic phenomenologists and broadly includes such different sorts of thinkers as Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Carl Rogers, communication is theorized as *dialogue* or *experience of otherness*. Communication theorized in this way explains the interplay of identity and difference in authentic human relationships and cultivates communication practices that enable and sustain authentic relationships.

Authentic communication, or dialogue, is founded on the experience of direct, unmediated contact with others. Communicative understanding begins in prereflective experience arising from our bodily existence in a shared lifeworld. Once we set aside the dualisms of mind and body, subject and object, as phenomenologists argue, we see that direct, unmediated contact with others is a very real and utterly necessary human experience, although it may be a fleeting experience that easily degrades into some form of inauthenticity. For example, when I feel a cold or angry glance from another person, I first experience the glance as a direct expression of the other's coldness or anger directed to me, not as an external sign of an internal, mental state of the other that can be interpreted in different ways (see Pilotta & Mickunas, 1990, pp. 111–114). In thus experiencing the other's expression toward me, I directly experience our commonality and also our difference, not only the other as other to me but myself as other to the other.

Hence, phenomenology challenges the semiotic notion that intersubjective understanding can be mediated only by signs (Stewart, 1995, 1996), as well as the rhetorical notion that communication involves artful or strategic uses of signs. Although “dialogue does not just happen” (except as a fleeting experience), neither can it be “planned, pronounced, or willed” (Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994, p. xxi). My experience of the other’s anger may be sustained in a dialogue that deepens our mutual understanding, but no conscious effort on my part can ensure such a happy outcome to an experience that, in the normal course of events, is more likely to alienate us. Among the paradoxes of communication that phenomenology brings to light is that conscious goal seeking, however benevolent one’s intentions may be, annihilates dialogue by interposing one’s own goals and strategies as a barrier against one’s direct experience of self and other. Problems of communication as conceived within the phenomenological tradition of communication theory thus arise from the necessity, and yet the inherent difficulty—even, arguably, the practical impossibility—of sustained, authentic communication between persons.

The phenomenological tradition, despite the arcane language in which it is so often couched, can be made plausible to ordinary people through rhetorical appeals to the commonplace beliefs that we can and should treat each other as persons (I-Thou) not as things (I-It), and that it is important to acknowledge and respect differences, to learn from others, to seek common ground, and to avoid polarization and strategic dishonesty in human relations. We have all experienced encounters with others in which we seemed to discover an immediate understanding beyond words. We all know, as phenomenologists variously affirm, that honesty is the best policy, that supportive relationships are essential to our healthy development as human beings, and that the most satisfactory human relationships are characterized by reciprocity and nondomination.

Phenomenology, however, is not only plausible, but also interesting from a practical standpoint because it both upholds dialogue as an ideal form of communication, yet also demonstrates the inherent difficulty of sustaining dialogue. It challenges our commonsense faith in the reliability of techniques for achieving good communication. It problematizes such commonsense distinctions as those between mind and body, facts and values, words and things.

Phenomenology shares with rhetorical theory an impulse to search for common ground among people with differing points of view and with semiotics the assumption that what is fundamentally problematic in communication has to do with intersubjective understanding. Phenomenology differs sharply from rhetoric, though, on questions of authenticity versus artifice and just as radically from semiotics on the relation between language and meaning. Phenomenology, from a rhetorical point of view, can seem hopelessly naive or unhelpfully idealistic in ap-

proaching the practical dilemmas that real communicators must face, whereas rhetoric, from a phenomenological point of view, can seem unduly cynical or pessimistic about the potential for authentic human contact. When rhetoric and phenomenology are combined, the result is typically an antirhetorical rhetoric in which persuasion and strategic action are replaced by dialogue and openness to the other (e.g., Brent, 1996; Foss & Griffin, 1995; Freeman, Littlejohn & Pearce, 1992), or else a hermeneutical rhetoric in which the roles of theory and method in communicative practice are downplayed (Gadamer, 1981; Leff, 1996).

Vis-à-vis semiotics, as Stewart (1995, 1996) has shown, the phenomenological tradition, with its doctrine of communication as direct contact, fundamentally questions the distinction between words and things and the assumption that communication can occur only through the mediation of signs. Thus, mixtures of semiotics and phenomenology can produce a theoretical compound that is deconstructively explosive if not impenetrably dense (e.g., Chang, 1996; Lanigan, 1992). In reply to this poststructuralist challenge, the traditional semiotician argues that signs must have stable meanings in order for communication to occur in practice (Ellis, 1991, 1995), whereas the traditional phenomenologist reiterates that the communicative use of language is a form of direct, unmediated contact between persons (Stewart, 1995).

What is at stake pragmatically in the debate between semiotics and phenomenology is obliquely illustrated by Peters (1994). It is commonly asserted that interpersonal interaction is the basic form of human communication, and that mass or technologically mediated communication is at best a poor substitute for direct human contact. Peters (1994), who elsewhere has severely criticized Lockean semiotics (Peters, 1989), here relies on the semiotic assumption of an inherent "gap" between transmission and reception of messages in order to argue that mass communication is actually more basic than interpersonal. "No distance," he now argues, "is so great as that between two minds," and "Dialogue conceals general features of discourse that are more evident in texts, especially the fact of distancing" (p. 130). In the end, however, Peters acknowledges that both dialogue and mediated communication are important, but difficult to combine because of "an enduring tension between specific and general modes of address" (p. 136). Only dialogue satisfies the basic human needs for "companionship, friendship and love," but mass communication expresses an "equally noble impulse" toward normative universality that often conflicts with the demands of intimacy (p. 136). "The distinction, then, between interpersonal and mass communication has hidden utopian energies" (p. 136) and potentially illuminates "our plight as creatures who belong both to a family and to a polis" (p. 137).

## **The Cybernetic Tradition: Communication as Information Processing**

We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal, by the name of Cybernetics. (Wiener, 1948, p. 19)

Modern communication theory arose out of the cybernetic marriage of statistics and control theory. (Krippendorff, 1989, p. 444)

Communication theory, the study and statement of the principles and methods by which information is conveyed. . . . (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1987)

Communication theory. See INFORMATION THEORY. (Audi, 1995)

Modern communication theory originated with the cybernetic tradition and the work of such mid-20th-century thinkers as Shannon, Wiener, von Neumann, and Turing (Heims, 1991; Krippendorff, 1989). This cybernetic tradition extends to current theories in areas as diverse as systems and information science, cognitive science and artificial intelligence, functionalist social theory, network analysis, and the Batesonian school of interpersonal communication (e.g., Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Communication in the cybernetic tradition is theorized as *information processing* and explains how all kinds of complex systems, whether living or nonliving, macro or micro, are able to function, and why they often malfunction. Epitomizing the transmission model, cybernetics conceives of communication problems as breakdowns in the flow of information resulting from noise, information overload, or mismatch between structure and function and, as resources for solving communication problems, offers various information-processing technologies and related methods of systems design and analysis, management, and, on the “softer” side, therapeutic intervention.

Cybernetics has plausibility as a way of theorizing communication in part because it appeals rhetorically to the commonplace assumptions of everyday materialism, functionalism, and rationalism. For cybernetics, the distinction between mind and matter is only a functional distinction like that between software and hardware. Thought is nothing more than information processing, and so it makes perfect sense to say that individual thought is “intrapersonal” communication and that groups and organizations also think, whole societies think, robots and artificial organisms will eventually think.<sup>18</sup> Cybernetics thus evokes the plausibility of a world in which Commander Data might be truly the most “human” member of the *Enterprise* crew: To assert otherwise is merely soft-headed sentimentality (a two-edged criticism in this case). Cybernetics, then, is also interesting and sometimes implausible from a commonsense view because it points out surprising analogies between living and nonliving systems, challenges commonplace beliefs about the significance of consciousness and emotion, and questions our usual distinctions between mind and matter, form and content, the real and the artificial.

Cybernetics also challenges simplistic notions of linear cause and effect by appealing to our commonsense understanding that communication processes can be enormously complex and subtle. Although rooted in technological functionalist thought, it emphasizes the problems of technological control, the perverse complexity and unpredictability of feedback processes, and the pervasive likelihood that communicative acts will have unintended consequences despite our best intentions. A great practical lesson of cybernetics is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, so it is important for us as communicators to transcend our individual perspectives, to look at the communication process from a broader, systemic viewpoint, and not to hold individuals responsible for systemic outcomes that no individual can control.

In valorizing technique and artifice, cybernetics shares common ground with rhetoric<sup>19</sup>; in collapsing human agency into underlying or overarching symbol-processing systems, it resembles semiotics<sup>20</sup>; in stressing the emergence of meaning in the interactions among elements of a system, it is like phenomenology.<sup>21</sup> Cybernetics, however, also has sharp differences with each of these other traditions. Communication as rhetoric is artful discourse that informs practical judgment, but communication as information processing is merely a mechanism that performs certain functions. Semiotics has problems with the cybernetic notion of “information,” which reduces semantic content (*what* a message means) to mere function (such as feedback or reduction of uncertainty). For the phenomenologist, authentic communication requires congruency between experience and expression, so sincerity is essential to the I-thou relationship of dialogue. The cybernetician, like the semiotician, points out, however, that we can never really know if another person (or even oneself) is being sincere in this way. From a cybernetic view, there are probably better ways to evaluate the reliability of information rather than trying to figure out if someone is being sincere.

In general, then, cybernetics, in contrast to other traditions of communication theory, cultivates a practical attitude that appreciates the complexity of communication problems and questions many of our usual assumptions about the differences between human and nonhuman information-processing systems.

**The Sociopsychological Tradition:  
Communication as Expression,  
Interaction, and Influence**

[In the 1950s] the study of communication found its greatest exemplars in the voting studies of Lazarsfeld and Berelson and the experimental persuasion studies of Hovland. By the mid-1950s, theoretically-focused communication study was concerned with issues of effects. This work recreated the general mediational framework in social psychology that was already evident in the 1930s . . . the mediating roles in communication of recipient predispositions and social processes, and . . . the possibility of differential effects. (Delia, 1987, p. 63)

[T]he kinds of “why” questions communication scholars choose to answer may differ from those that intrigue psychologists. . . . As communication theorists, we also need to understand when, how, and why interaction alters sender behavior patterns and receiver judgments. (Burgoon & Buller, 1996, pp. 316–317)

The 20th-century tradition of experimental social psychology, which continues to predominate in much of what is called “communication science” (Berger & Chaffee, 1987), theorizes communication as *a process of expression, interaction, and influence*, a process in which the behavior of humans or other complex organisms expresses psychological mechanisms, states, and traits and, through interaction with the similar expressions of other individuals, produces a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects.

Communication, in short, is the process by which individuals interact and influence each other. Communication may occur face-to-face or through technological media and may flow from one to one, one to many, or many to many, but in all formats it involves (contrary to the phenomenological view) interposed elements that mediate between individuals. Whereas for semiotics, communication is mediated by signs and sign systems, for social psychology, it is mediated by psychological predispositions (attitudes, emotional states, personality traits, unconscious conflicts, social cognitions, etc.) as modified by the emergent effects of social interaction (which may include the effects of media technologies and institutions as well as interpersonal influence).

Communication theorized in this way explains the causes and effects of social behavior and cultivates practices that attempt to exert intentional control over those behavioral causes and effects. Communication problems in the sociopsychological tradition are thus thought of as situations that call for the effective manipulation of the causes of behavior in order to produce objectively defined and measured outcomes.

Social psychology seems plausible and practically useful because it appeals to our commonsense beliefs and our everyday practical concerns about the causes and effects of communication. We readily believe that our ways of communicating and our reactions to the communications of others vary according to our individual personalities. Human nature being what it is, we are not surprised to learn that our judgments can be influenced by the immediate social context and are often biased in predictable ways by our strong beliefs, attitudes, and emotional states. We know, too, that interactional processes in groups, such as those involving leadership and conflict, can affect group outcomes, so it is important to understand these causal relations in order to manage the processes effectively.

While appealing to these commonplace beliefs, sociopsychological theory deeply challenges the equally commonsensical premise that humans are rational beings. Its recurrent demonstrations of human weak-

ness and irrationality challenge our commonsense faith in our own personal autonomy.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, social psychology skeptically questions all unproven assumptions about causal influences on human behavior, for which it requires—and attempts to provide—rigorous experimental evidence. It criticizes rhetoric, for example, for lacking proof that its persuasive techniques really work and cybernetics for reducing all communication to information-processing algorithms that ignore the vagaries of motivation, personality, and emotion. As a mode of social practice, social psychology, like cybernetics, valorizes technique; it holds forth the promise that our lives can be improved through the self-conscious application by experts of techniques of psychological manipulation and therapy. Thus, a sociopsychological theory of rhetoric tends to view rhetoric more as a technology of psychological manipulation rather than an art of discourse that informs the receiver's judgment. Social psychology is not, however, without its own moral view: It implies a strong moral imperative that we as individual communicators should make responsible choices based on scientific evidence concerning the likely consequences of our messages.

### **The Sociocultural Tradition: Communication as the (Re)Production of Social Order**

Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed. (Carey, 1989, p. 23)

Wherever activities or artifacts have symbolic values that articulate individuals into positions vis-à-vis each other or their collectivities, the communicative is present. (Rothenbuhler, 1993, p. 162)

A communication practice—or discursive practice—is, then, an actual means of expression in a community, given that community's specific scenes and historical circumstances (in the broadest sense). (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 14)

Sociocultural communication theory represents the “discovery” of communication, largely since the 19th century and partly under the influence of semiotic thought, within the intellectual traditions of sociology and anthropology. Communication in these traditions is typically theorized as *a symbolic process that produces and reproduces shared sociocultural patterns*. So conceived, communication explains how social order (a macrolevel phenomenon) is created, realized, sustained, and transformed in microlevel interaction processes. We exist in a sociocultural environment that is constituted and maintained in large part by symbolic codes and media of communication.<sup>23</sup> The term “(re)production” suggests the paradoxical reflexivity of this process. Our everyday interactions with others depend heavily on preexisting, shared cultural patterns and social structures. From this point of view, our everyday interactions largely “reproduce” the existing sociocultural order. Social interaction, though, is also a creative process that permits and even requires a good deal of improvisation that, albeit collectively and

in the long run, “produces” the very social order that makes interaction possible in the first place. A central problem of sociocultural theory is thus to find the right balance, that is, to sort out the complex relations between production and reproduction, micro and macro, agency and structure, particular local culture and universal natural law, in social life. A primary axis of debate is between structural theories that give explanatory priority to relatively stable, macrolevel patterns and interpretive or interactionist theories that give priority to microlevel processes in which social order is locally cocreated and negotiated by members.<sup>24</sup>

Communication problems in the sociocultural tradition are thought of as gaps across space (sociocultural diversity and relativity) and across time (sociocultural change) that disable interaction by depleting the stock of shared patterns on which interaction depends. Conflicts, misunderstandings, and difficulties in coordination increase when social conditions afford a scarcity of shared rituals, rules, and expectations among members. Sociocultural theory thus has much to say about problems arising from technological change, breakdown of traditional social orders, urbanization and mass society, bureaucratic rationalization, and, more recently, postmodern cultural fragmentation and globalization. Such perturbations in the ecology of codes and media disrupt interaction, but at the same time enable the creative production of new meanings and new means of communication.

Hybrids of sociocultural and other traditions of communication theory are quite common, so common indeed that relatively “pure” exemplars of sociocultural communication theory may be hard to come by. Social action media theory, for example, melds a range of sociocultural, phenomenological, and semiotic perspectives (Schoening & Anderson, 1995). CMM theory melds interactionist social theory with cybernetic and dialogical concepts (Cronen, 1995; Pearce, 1989). Conversation analysis has interactionist, phenomenological, and semiotic roots (Heritage, 1984).

Rhetorical theory in the 20th century has also taken a strongly sociocultural turn in which rhetoric has quite often been conceptualized as an instrument for improving human relations (Ehninger, 1968), and “some have argued that acculturation to the forms and practices of organizations, social groups, sciences, technologies, subcultures, and cultures is significantly rhetorical learning . . . [of] what is communicatively appropriate to particular bodies of content in particular situations” (Arnold, 1989, p. 464). Sociocultural order thus constitutes the materials of rhetoric, while rhetoric becomes a method, whether consciously or unconsciously applied, for the constitution of social order.

In all of these hybrid traditions, however, a distinct sociocultural “voice” can be heard. It is the voice, for example, that criticizes social psychology for its excessive individualism, inattention to macrosocial

forces, and insensitivity to cultural differences and calls, again and again, for sociopsychologically dominated communication research to adopt a more cultural or social approach.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, it criticizes classical rhetoric for its naive assumptions about agency (in portraying great orators as shapers of history, for example) and semiotics for abstracting signs and sign processes from the larger sociocultural context in which they function.

This sociocultural voice has also worked its way into everyday practical metadiscourse. Sociocultural theory is plausible from a lay point of view in part because it appeals rhetorically to the commonplace beliefs that individuals are products of their social environments, that groups develop particular norms, rituals, and worldviews; that social change can be difficult and disruptive; and that attempts to intervene actively in social processes often have unintended consequences. Sociocultural theory also challenges many commonplace assumptions, especially our tendencies to take for granted the absolute reality of our own and others' personal identities, to think of social institutions as if they were inevitable natural phenomena, to be ethnocentric or insensitive to cultural differences, and to overattribute moral responsibility to individuals for problems, like poverty and crime, that are largely societal in origin. Sociocultural theory cultivates communicative practices that acknowledge cultural diversity and relativity, value tolerance and understanding, and emphasize collective more than individual responsibility. The everyday practical discourse of blame and responsibility, for example, has clearly been influenced by theoretical discourses on "society" in the sociocultural tradition (Bowers & Iwi, 1993).

### **The Critical Tradition: Communication as Discursive Reflection**

For the communicative model of action, language is relevant only from the pragmatic viewpoint that speakers, in employing sentences with an orientation to reaching understanding, take up relations to the world, not only directly as in teleological, normatively regulated or dramaturgical action, but in a reflective way. . . . They no longer relate straightaway to something in the objective, social, or subjective worlds; instead they relativize their utterances against the possibility that their validity will be contested by other actors. (Habermas, 1984, p. 98)

When we see the constraints that limit our choices we are aware of power relations; when we see only choices we live in and reproduce power. (Lannamann, 1991, p. 198)

Systematically distorted communication, then, is an ongoing process within particular systems as they strategically (though latently) work to reproduce, rather than produce, themselves. (Deetz, 1992, p. 187)

Undoability is the ultimate consequence of the adage that power becomes slippery when reflected upon. (Krippendorff, 1995, p. 113)

The origins of critical communication theory can be traced to Plato's conception of Socratic dialectic as a method for attaining truth in the

give and take of disputative interaction by asking questions that provoke critical reflection upon the contradictions that come to light in the process. Critical communication theory emphasizes a certain instability that inheres, according to Habermas (1984), in every act of communication oriented to the achievement of mutual understanding, a built-in telos towards articulating, questioning, and transcending presuppositions that are judged to be untrue, dishonest, or unjust. Communication that involves only the transmission-reception or ritual sharing of meanings is inherently faulty, distorted, incomplete. Authentic communication occurs only in a process of *discursive reflection* that moves towards a transcendence that can never be fully and finally achieved—but the reflective process itself is progressively emancipatory.

The tradition of critical social theory (broadly construed) runs from Marx through the Frankfurt School to Habermas, or alternatively through other strands of late Marxism and post-Marxism to current theories of political economy, critical cultural studies, feminist theory, and related schools of theory associated with new social movements (such as postcolonial theory and queer theory).<sup>26</sup> For critical communication theory, the basic “problem of communication” in society arises from material and ideological forces that preclude or distort discursive reflection. Communication conceived in this way explains how social injustice is perpetuated by ideological distortions and how justice can potentially be restored through communicative practices that enable critical reflection or consciousness-raising in order to unmask those distortions and thereby enable political action to liberate the participants from them.

The critical tradition is plausible from a lay point of view when it appeals to commonplace beliefs about the omnipresence of injustice and conflict in society, the ways in which power and domination can overcome truth and reason, and the potential for discourse with others to produce liberating insight, demystification, perhaps even the realization that one has been “had.” Critical theory appeals to commonplace values of freedom, equality, and reason, yet it challenges many of our commonplace assumptions about what is reasonable. It challenges the naturalness of the social order and questions the rational validity of all authority, tradition, and conventional belief, including traditional beliefs about the nature of reason itself, which, it claims, have distorted reason in the service of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. It challenges commonplace assumptions about the objectivity and moral-political neutrality of science and technology. It challenges the pervasive individualism of our culture and the ideological dominance of instrumental reason, the assumption that rationality consists entirely in means-ends calculations where the ends in question can only be voluntaristically chosen based on individual interests. It is, or at least tries to be, the most deeply practical kind of theory, although its notion of what is practical

often clashes sharply with commonsense notions of practicality. Fundamentally, in the tradition of Marx, its point is not to understand the world—and certainly not to teach students how to get along successfully in the world as it is. Its point is to change the world through praxis, or theoretically reflective social action.

Any mode of communication theory can take a self-reflexive, critical turn and so produce a hybrid variety such as critical rhetoric (McKerrow, 1989) or critical semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1993; Fairclough, 1995). Most interesting, from the standpoint of dialogical-dialectical coherence, are efforts to acknowledge and work through the contradictions between critical theory and other traditions of communication theory as, for example, Condit (1989) and Farrell (1993) have done in rhetorical theory. The literature on critical theory vis-à-vis sociocultural theory is, of course, vast, indeed nearly coextensive with the entire body of recent social theory, for critical theory is inherently a critique of the reproduction of social order that is sociocultural theory's central theme.

Yet, critical theory offers, I believe, a model for communication practice that differs radically from the sociocultural model of communication as (re)production. For the critical theorist, an activity that merely reproduces existing social order, or even one that produces new social order, is not yet authentic communication. In order for social order to be based on genuine mutual understanding (as distinct from strategic manipulation, oppressive conformity, or empty ritual), it recurrently becomes necessary for communicators to articulate, question, and openly discuss their differing assumptions about the objective world, moral norms, and inner experience (Habermas, 1984, pp. 75–101; also see Deetz, 1992, 1994).

The critical-theoretic model of communication as discursive reflection thus resembles the phenomenological concept of dialogue, to which it adds, however, a distinctly dialectical aspect. In a critical perspective, phenomenological dialogue represents an ideal form of communication, but one that existing sociocultural conditions may render unlikely. A model of dialogue is defective, therefore, that fails to move participants towards reflection on the sociocultural conditions that potentially disable dialogue. It is the dialectical questioning of presuppositions that unmask those conditions and thereby points the way to social changes that would render genuine dialogue possible. A similar pattern of communication characterizes various forms of ideology critique and feminist or identity-based consciousness-raising. It also clearly applies to Krippendorff's (1995) recent theory of "undoing" power, a work that draws upon cybernetic and phenomenological modes of communication theory to create a hybrid critical theory that seems considerably more sanguine than most other critical theories about the potential for insight alone (in the absence of concerted political action) to change the world.

Critical theory is criticized from other theoretical traditions for politicizing science and scholarship, and for asserting a universal normative standard for communication based on a priori ideology. Some critics of critical theory believe that science should have nothing to say about normative standards; others, that normative standards should be based on objective empirical criteria; still others, that normative standards can only be relative to local cultures and particular communication practices. In response to its critics, critical theory criticizes other theoretical traditions for their blindness to their own ideological presuppositions and their false pretensions to political neutrality. For critical theorists, local practices and empirical outcomes of communication cannot be taken at face value, but must always be judged in light of a reflective analysis of the distorting effects of power and ideology in society.

As these arguments go on, perhaps the most useful contribution of critical theory, aside from its obvious relevance to the discourse of social injustice and change, may be to cultivate a deeper appreciation of discursive reflection as a practical possibility intrinsic to all communication. Communication, as I pointed out earlier, is not only something we do, it is something we recurrently talk about in ways that are practically entwined with our doing of it. This practical metadiscourse always has the potential to develop into a truly reflective discourse that engages communication theory with practice (Craig, 1996b). A critical tradition of communication theory thus confirms that reflective discourse and, therefore, communication theory itself, have important roles to play in our everyday understanding and practice of communication.

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### **Working the Field: Concluding Reflections**

This preliminary sketch of communication theory as a field presents much to think about and leaves much to do. I conclude with brief reflections on the agenda for future work and implications for disciplinary practice in communication studies.

#### **The Work Ahead: Exploration, Creation, Application**

The work ahead involves *exploring* the field to discover key issues and map the complex topography of the traditions; *creating* new traditions of communication theory and new ways of schematizing the field; and *applying* communication theory by engaging it with practical metadiscourse on communication problems.

*Exploring* the field involves both traversing the traditions to explore the complementarities and tensions among them and spelunking the traditions to explore their internal complexity.

The theoretical matrix invites us to locate points of agreement and disagreement among the traditions of communication theory. In so do-

ing, we will articulate central themes and problems of communication theory as a field. Notions of communication strategy and technique, for example, are salient in several traditions, but thinking across these traditions, including rhetoric, phenomenology, cybernetics, social psychology, and critical theory, problematizes these notions in theoretically and practically interesting ways. The problem of strategy versus authenticity (rhetoric or social psychology versus phenomenology), the problem of intentionality versus functionality (rhetoric or phenomenology versus cybernetics), the problem of proving the effectiveness of techniques (social psychology versus rhetoric), the problem of instrumental reason as ideological distortion (critical theory versus cybernetics or social psychology)—these problems can now be recognized and addressed as central, field-defining problems of communication theory.

As we further explore the traditions, it will be important to bear in mind that each tradition is internally complex and open to multiple interpretations. The traditions of communication theory can be redefined, recombined, hybridized, and subdivided in various ways. The rhetorical tradition includes many proliferating and contending schools of thought, as do semiotics, phenomenology, and so on. Theoretical fields may appear like fractals—graphic functions that have the same formal properties at every level of granularity. Each tradition of communication theory itself is a complex field that, when magnified, displays a dialogical-dialectical field structure of multiple traditions much like that of communication theory as a whole. If we zoom out to a coarser level of granularity, the field of communication theory collapses into one tradition of thought within a complex megafield of the human sciences. Perhaps an ideal, “user-friendly” way of representing communication theory would be in the form of an interactive hypertext that would allow us to pursue the subject on myriad paths through hyperlinks within and across levels to hybrid traditions and alternative schematizations, cognate disciplines, and multimedia recordings of communication practices linking theory to practical metadiscourse.<sup>27</sup>

*Creating* new theory is a task that our efforts to explore the field will inevitably necessitate and inspire as we stumble over conceptual gaps, new ideas, and new forms and practices of communication.

Each of the seven traditions is based on a unique model of communicative practice, essentially different from all others in the matrix. They compose, therefore, a distinguishable set of alternatives, but not a logically exhaustive set. The field of communication theory is logically open to new traditions, subject only to the limitation that each new tradition must be based on a unique model of communicative practice that, when integrated into the field (which may involve redefining other traditions), is not logically redundant with any other model.

Any of the following traditions, for example, might potentially be reconstructed to create distinct theorizations of communicative practice:

- A feminist tradition in which communication might be theorized as *connectedness to others*, thus giving voice to “the distinctive emphasis that many women put on contextual thinking and decision-making, a focus on the importance and usefulness of talk, connectedness, and relationships” (Kramarae, 1989, p. 157; also see Foss & Griffin, 1996). How would this model of communication differ from the phenomenological model of dialogue? How would it resituate feminism vis-à-vis critical theory?

- An aesthetic tradition in which communication might be theorized as *embodied performance*, thus highlighting the “poetic” aspect of communication in the creation of rituals, relationships, meanings, and truths (e.g., Conquergood, 1992; Hopper, 1993). How would this differ from semiotic and sociocultural models of communication? How would it reposition rhetoric and critical theory in the field (Conquergood, 1992; Laffoon, 1995)?

- An economic tradition in which communication might be theorized as *exchange*, thus emphasizing that every message (anything transferable from one agent to another) has an exchange value that equates to its meaning. What would this tradition look like, reconstructed after extracting it from its several entanglements with other traditions such as critical theory (Schiller, 1994), phenomenology (Chang, 1996), and social psychology (Roloff, 1981)?

- A spiritual tradition in which communication might be theorized as *communion on a nonmaterial or mystical plane of existence*, thus revealing the ultimately ineffable roots of community—and its practical dependency on faith—in a realm of experience that transcends history and all human differences (e.g., Cooper, 1994; Crawford, 1996; Goodall, 1996; Pym, 1997; Ramsey, 1997). How does this transcendent community intersect with other kinds of transcendence posited by phenomenology (in dialogue), sociocultural theory (in culture), and critical theory (in reflection)?

If these examples seem facile, consider the rigorous standard imposed by the requirement that every new tradition must contribute a unique theorization of communicative practice. For example, the idea of a biological tradition of communication theory might seem plausible, given the recent interest in biological approaches to communication (e.g., Cappella, 1996), but I am not aware of any distinct, biological way of theorizing communicative practice that would not be better described as semiotic (e.g., Liska, 1993), sociopsychological (e.g., Cappella, 1991, 1995), or cybernetic (as in studies of genetic information-processing or feedback loops in ecosystems). Communication practice, theorized as

mediation by signs (semiotics), interaction (social psychology), or information processing (cybernetics), can perhaps be explained by biological principles such as those of organismic development or evolution by natural selection (Cappella, 1991, 1995, 1996; Hauser, 1996; Horvath, 1995), but I am unaware of any unique biological conceptualization of communicative practice itself. A tradition that does not meet this rigorous standard is logically outside the field of communication theory.

This does not, of course, rule out the possibility that someone will discover or invent a biological theorization of communication. New ideas are always emerging in academic discourse and may suggest new ways of theorizing communication. New theorizations of communication can also emerge from grounded practical theory, through the critical study and conceptual reconstruction of communicative practices in any cultural tradition or local setting (Craig & Tracy, 1995). In principle, then, we have every reason to assume that new traditions of communication theory and new views on old traditions will continue to be discovered or invented, so we should not hope, nor need we worry, that the work of creating communication theory will ever be completed.

*Applying* communication theory involves engaging the traditions of theoretical metadiscourse with practical metadiscourse on real communication problems. It is in this process of application that communication theory can most logically be tested to establish its relevance and usefulness for guiding the conduct and criticism of practice.<sup>28</sup> Each tradition provides a metadiscursive vocabulary in which communication problems and practices can be conceptualized and discussed. Mastering multiple vocabularies of communication theory makes it possible to examine communication problems from various points of view and to apply vocabularies that seem appropriate and helpful in each case.<sup>29</sup> Because each tradition appeals to some metadiscursive commonplaces while challenging others, each vocabulary has the potential to provoke and inform metacommunicative reflection. Discussions about whether someone is being overly “strategic” in their communication, for example, might apply the vocabularies of rhetoric and phenomenology and provoke reflection on the paradoxes of radically authentic communication. Such a reflective discourse can move along a continuum between theory and practice and, in its more theoretical moments, can become indistinguishable from the theoretical metadiscourse of communication theory itself (Craig, 1996b). In these moments of intersection between theoretical and practical metadiscourse, the work of exploring, creating, and applying communication theory merges in one activity.

### **Implications for Disciplinary Practice in Communication Studies**

The main implication for our disciplinary practice is that we communication theorists all now have something very important to argue about—

the social practice of communication—so we should stop ignoring each other and start addressing our work to the field of communication theory. As a result of our doing so, there will be a field of communication theory.

What exactly is involved in addressing our work to the field? Three things, I suggest (along with Anderson, 1996): (a) orienting to the field as a broad disciplinary audience; (b) giving voice to the field's distinctive concerns in interdisciplinary research; and (c) educating our students in the field. To elaborate:

1. Communication theorists should address their writing, even though usually on specialized topics, to the field as a whole. This means they should show an awareness of relevant traditions of communication theory, engage central themes and issues in the field, highlight practical implications, and respond to interests and criticisms anticipated from other traditions. Given the realities of academic specialization, individual scholars cannot be expected to understand every area of the field in depth. Arguments directed across traditions will not always, then, be very innovative and may be technically naive in some respects. They still will signal the field relevance of the work and provide entry points (and motivating irritants) for other scholars more deeply involved at the intersections between certain theoretical traditions to correct errors, clarify issues, and carry the discussion to deeper levels. That is what dialogical-dialectical coherence might look like in practice.

2. The theoretical matrix suggests both the interdisciplinary centrality as well as the disciplinary focus of communication studies. Every tradition refers to interdisciplinary research areas (in political communication, semiotics and cultural studies, philosophy, information science, and so on) that can be enriched by other perspectives from communication theory. Tracy (1990, in press), for example, has asserted a distinct communication approach to interdisciplinary discourse studies characterized by its normative and applied interests, awareness of audience, and focus on problems and strategies. These characteristics bespeak a blend of rhetorical, sociopsychological, and other influences from communication theory. Communication scholars informed by the traditions of their field have opportunities to move beyond productive fragmentation and contribute something more to interdisciplinary studies.

3. Those of us who teach communication theory face unique challenges. Undergraduates come to communication classes for something practical, and we offer them theory. They come for something comprehensible, and we offer them fragments of a subject no one can comprehend—up to 249 theories and still counting. The analysis in Tables 1 and 2 invites a pedagogy that treats the entire field as a resource for reflecting on practical problems and, in moving from a sketchy overview more deeply into the field, moves not away from practical concerns but more deeply into them.

Advanced students must also learn to use communication theory in other ways. Students wanting to do original research “cannot ignore the need to specialize methodologically, and hence theoretically” (Reeves, 1992, p. 238). Still, a broad overview of the field can enable them to address the implications of specialized work to wider disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and lay audiences. The “job” of learning communication theory at an advanced level becomes a little easier for specialists in each tradition who can focus primarily on “their own” row and column of Table 2, that is, on issues between their own tradition of communication theory and other traditions. Other cells in the matrix can be left largely to specialists in other traditions.

Drawing on one tradition of communication theory, we might think of Tables 1 and 2 as a scaffold for building a scheme of rhetorical invention—a scheme of commonplaces and stock arguments—that can assist in preparing students of communication to participate in the discourse of the discipline at large, just as the traditional art of rhetoric prepares citizens to participate in the discourse of general public affairs. The art of rhetoric appeals to “commonplace” or “public” or “social” knowledge—knowledge already shared in common by members of an audience. Similarly, the field of communication theory marks out 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. This field of communication theory is not a repository of absolute truth. It claims no more than to be useful.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> For a far from complete sample of recent books presenting original work explicitly on general communication theory, without regard to disciplinary origin but excluding work on more specific topics like media effects or interpersonal relationships, see Altheide (1995), Anderson (1996), Angus & Langsdorf (1992), Carey (1989), Chang (1996), Deetz (1992), Goodall (1996), Greene (1997), Harris (1996), Hauser (1996), Kaufer & Carley (1993), Leeds-Hurwitz (1995), Mantovani (1996), Mortensen (1994), Mortensen with Ayres (1997), Norton & Brenders (1995), Pearce (1989), Pilotta & Mickunas (1990), Rothenbuhler (1998), Sigman (1995b), Stewart (1995), J. Taylor (1993), T. Taylor (1992), Theall (1995).

<sup>2</sup> There are some indicators of a field (see Anderson, 1996; Craig, 1989). Further, histories of communication theory are beginning to appear (Mattelart, 1996; Schiller, 1996), and collective works (handbooks, encyclopedias, anthologies) of varying currency, inclusiveness, and usefulness can be found (e.g., Arnold & Bowers, 1984; Barnouw et al., 1989; Casmir, 1994; Coble, 1996; Crowley & Mitchell, 1994; Cushman & Kovacic, 1995; Kovacic, 1997; Philipsen & Albrecht, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Communication theory comes from many different academic disciplines, and scholars notoriously ignore work published outside their own disciplines. Hence, they tend to write about com-

munication while paying no attention to work being done anywhere else, most especially within the communication discipline proper. To their credit, communication scholars themselves have tended to deviate from this pattern. They frequently cite work from other disciplines. Indeed, often they are more likely to cite work from outside than inside their own discipline. Hence, they tend not to cite each other, beyond their own little cliques, which has the unintended consequence that communication scholars are relatively little cited by anyone either inside or outside of their own discipline (Myers, Brashers, Center, Beck, & Wert-Gray, 1992; Paisley, 1984; Reeves & Borgman, 1983; Rice, Borgman, & Reeves, 1988; So, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> "It is as if the field of communication research were punctuated by a number of isolated frog ponds—with no friendly croaking between the ponds, very little productive intercourse at all, few cases of successful cross-fertilization" (Rosengren, 1993, p. 9).

<sup>5</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that one writer asks why there are so few communication theories (Berger, 1991), and another asks why there are so many (Craig, 1993). They disagree not only on what to count as a theory, but on the size and shape of the field in which they are counting theories.

<sup>6</sup> General histories of communication studies (Delia, 1987; Rogers, 1994) have also emphasized the field's multidisciplinary origins.

<sup>7</sup> Dance & Larson (1976) extended the list to 126 definitions, a number that, in the nature of things, can only have increased with time.

<sup>8</sup> For a critique that emphasizes the more oppressive, exclusionary tendencies of traditional disciplines, see McLaughlin (1995), Sholle (1995), and Streeter (1995). Although these critics are against the "discipline" of communication, they are for the "field" of communication, which they describe as a "postdiscipline." Despite the difference in terminology, we seem to agree that communication studies should aspire to some (nonoppressive, nonexclusionary) sort of coherence. Other critics have attacked the very idea of coherence, citing important institutional and intellectual benefits that flow from disciplinary fragmentation (e.g., O'Keefe, 1993; Newcomb, 1993; Peters, 1993; Swanson, 1993). I hope to address these arguments in detail in another essay. Here I can respond only by offering a different, but not necessarily incompatible, perspective.

<sup>9</sup> See, for versions of this argument, Beniger (1993); Berger & Chaffee (1987, p. 894); Cronkhite (1986); Deetz (1994); Luhmann (1992); Motley (1991); Pearce (1989); Rothenbuhler (1993, 1996, 1998); Shepherd (1993); Sigman (1992, 1995a).

<sup>10</sup> Might communication studies even claim to be *the* fundamental discipline that explains all other disciplines, since disciplines themselves are social constructs that, like all social constructs, are constituted symbolically through communication? Yes, of course, but only as a joke! Virtually any discipline can claim to be the "fundamental" social discipline based on some tortured argument in which all social processes become fundamentally cognitive, economic, political, cultural—or indeed, why not chemical or subatomic? The irony that makes the joke funny is that every discipline occupies the precise center of the universe in its own perspective. Communication is no exception, but communication as a metaperspective—a perspective on perspectives—may help us to appreciate the irony of our situation.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Deetz (1994); also see Carey (1989), Pearce (1989), and Shepherd (1993). The idea that communication has an essential role in the formation of democratic community has philosophical roots in American pragmatism. For classic statements of this view, see Dewey (1916, 1927) and McKeon (1957).

<sup>12</sup> This logical paradox, that communication exists only as constituted by communication (but gee, what constitutes the communication that constitutes communication?), has been well explored within the cybernetic tradition of communication theory (e.g., Bateson, 1972; Krippendorff, 1997; Luhmann, 1992). It is but one manifestation of the paradoxical reflexivity between meaning and context, or message and metamessage, that characterizes all communication.

<sup>13</sup> Carey (1989), McKinzie (1994), Reddy (1979), and Taylor (1992) all suggest that communication, in Euro-American cultures at least, is commonly thought of as a transmission process.

<sup>14</sup> Although proponents of a constitutive model do not always reject the transmission model completely, they seldom sing its virtues. Peters (1994) is perhaps an exception.

<sup>15</sup> Notice that reflexive self-criticisms of each tradition from its own standpoint are indicated in the diagonal cells from upper left to lower right of Table 2. These might be taken as fissures or points of instability for deconstructing the traditions, but I prefer to think of them as zones of self-questioning that potentiate dialogue and innovation.

<sup>16</sup> Arnold defines rhetoric as the "study and teaching of practical, usually persuasive communication" and notes the underlying "hypothesis that the influence and significance of communication depend on the methods chosen in conceiving, composing, and presenting messages" (1989, p. 461).

<sup>17</sup> The classic text is Locke (1690/1979); see Peters (1989), Steiner (1989), Taylor (1992).

- <sup>18</sup> For classic statements of this functionalist view of mind, see Bateson (1972) and Dennett (1979).
- <sup>19</sup> Kaufer & Butler (1996) can be regarded as a hybrid of rhetoric and cybernetics.
- <sup>20</sup> For various blends of the two, see Cherry (1966); Eco (1976); Wilden (1972).
- <sup>21</sup> Krippendorff's recent work (e.g., 1993) represents a movement from cybernetics towards phenomenology that retains significant traces of the former. Several chapters in Steier's (1991) anthology on reflexivity display similar tendencies.
- <sup>22</sup> As Herman points out, the rise of psychology as a cultural worldview during the 20th century was fueled in part by a series of wars and other terrible events that "called rationality and autonomy into question" (1995, p. 7).
- <sup>23</sup> Meyrowitz claims "that virtually all the specific questions and arguments about a particular medium, or media in general, can be linked to one of three underlying metaphors for what a medium is . . . media as conduits, media as languages, media as environments" (1993, p. 56). In the sociopsychological tradition, media are conduits; in the semiotic tradition, they are languages; in the sociocultural tradition, they are environments.
- <sup>24</sup> Recent attempts to strike a balance between the two poles include, for example, structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), practice theory (Bourdieu, 1992), and ecological models (e.g., Altheide, 1995; Mantovani, 1996).
- <sup>25</sup> Recent calls for a "constitutive" or "communicationa!" communication theory have often followed this line of argument; see, for example, Carey (1989), Sigman (1992, 1995a, 1995b), and several chapters in Leeds-Hurwitz (1995). Also see Sigman (1987) and Thomas (1980).
- <sup>26</sup> For a recent symposium illustrating the current centrality of Habermas in this tradition, see Huspek (1997).
- <sup>27</sup> On cybernetic principles of good communication, a user-friendly representation of communication theory should be structured so as to facilitate efficient cognitive processing. Based on Miller's (1956) classic theory of human information-processing capacity, this would limit the number of distinct "traditions" (or "chunks") of theory that could be included at any one level of the theoretical scheme to about seven, which happens to be the precise number of traditions in the present matrix.
- <sup>28</sup> Methods and standards for testing or critically assessing practical communication theory raise complex issues beyond the scope of the present essay. See Craig (1995, 1996b) and Craig & Tracy (1995) for work that broaches discussion on these issues.
- <sup>29</sup> This is consistent with Jonson and Toulmin's view that the application of theory in practice is inherently rhetorical and perspectival rather than "geometrical" or formally deductive (1988, p. 293). Alternative theories are not mutually exclusive but offer limited, complementary perspectives on practical problems (Craig, 1996b).

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