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## Histories of Communication

### **Histories of Communication**

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## Histories of Communication

“The secret to relationships is good communication.” “The president is a good speaker.” “I was impressed with your communication skills.” “Your disorganized presentation was what turned the whole board against the idea! You let us all down. You’re fired!” “I really believe she is sincere and I will be voting for her.” “Today’s graduating students just do not know how to communicate.” “I saw on Facebook that ‘It’s complicated.’” “We regret that we will not be employing you for the position; your communication skills were just not good enough.” “I’m interested in Random Play.” “I just got a job that is a fast track to the top in management. Will you marry me?” “Fox News just said that the president lied.” “Hi!”

We are judged on many occasions and in many circumstances by the way in which we “communicate,” yet our dean claims that she does not know what “communication studies” is all about. Is it the same as “media”? Journalism? PR? Speech? Writing? At the everyday level what are the common features of persuading someone to buy your car, become your partner, leave the relationship, not to divorce, take a job with your company, get your instructor to change a grade? What skills and styles of nonverbal behavior are relevant to being friendly, making a complaint, or winning an argument? What is the correct way to critique a movie, write a good (not bad) essay, or devise a good advertising tag line? Is there anything you do that is not communication at some level (even silence can be dumb insolence, resolute bravery in the face of torture, an insult, a refusal to answer a reasonable question...)? Is communication studies about anything specific?

Yes. And no. At the most basic level, communication studies is about the many issues surrounding the transfer of ideas and messages from one person to another, the impact of that exchange, and the outcomes that result. It started with the ancient Greek schools of rhetoric and philosophy, which were often in conflict with one another. Rhetoricians wanted to persuade people; philosophers wanted to find good, honest, truthful arguments. Sometimes dishonest means of persuasion were OK with rhetoricians but not with philosophers (just like lawyers today who want to win the case even if it might involve trickery like a catchy phrase such as “If it does not fit, you must acquit”). Sometimes both approaches ran into the issue that a “good man” (yes) was persuasive because he honestly spoke what he believed, and observers were persuaded by his ethos or good character. But, asked the philosophers, what is a “good” man?

From these ancient disputes and concerns, none of which has really been resolved in the last 2,500 years, communication as a field has evolved and is either relatively new or immensely ancient depending your point of view. The Greeks certainly had no newspapers or TV or Twitter, so media would be restricted to performance of plays, posting of public notices, and government decrees. Are these media as we understand the term? Or is media all about electronics and mass distribution? Anyone who tries to define communication studies must face such questions and the puzzlement of deans. We all know what communication is, but you just try to define it! (Let us know if you succeed. We want to impress our deans).

*Communication in Everyday Life* makes the point in the first three chapters that communication can be **representational or presentational**, that is, any communication can describe “facts” or can offer a “spin” on those facts. So we must make the point that “history” is also presentational and puts a particular spin on “facts.” Any writer injects a set of personal values and perspectives into the history that gets written. Indeed at the end of this chapter, one of the last sections will be about the way in which the influence of women and people of color tends to have been neglected in earlier and more traditional reports

of the history of the discipline, and until the last 40 years nobody ever thought that was wrong or odd or inexcusable. It was just a fact.

There is an area of study in communication studies that is devoted to **historiography**. Historiography studies the persuasive effect of writing history in particular ways and the reasons why particular kinds of reports and analyses are offered by specific kinds of authors. For example, why are some topics rather than others picked out for discussion? Why do textbook writers spend longer writing about Andrew Jackson's great Democratization Experiment that extended the franchise to all (white) men, not just to those who owned property? Why do they not give twice that amount of coverage to his similarity to Adolf Hitler with disgusting racist authoritarianism, a dismissive disrespect for the Constitution (towards Chief Justice Marshall), and his "ethnic cleansing" policy about the "Red Stick" Creeks, the Seminole, and the Cherokee? The social and cultural positioning of authors influence what they write. For example, (surprise!) British reports of the American Revolution tend to be different in emphasis from such reports in American history textbooks! Apparently "rebels" and "patriots" can actually be the same people, depending on who is writing about them. Jackson can be represented in a good light to American school children while other audiences find him a human offense and can fully understand why he was the first American president to be the subject of an assassination attempt.

It is also important to notice that the way history is written depends on many contemporary political and social forces that help to influence the report in much the same way that Society's Secret Agents influence our behavior in public (see Chapters 5–9). For example, anyone who wrote a history of communication studies today without mentioning the important contributions made by women and people of color would simply be ignored. Nevertheless, even 25 years ago, such histories were offered as standard reading for students (Delia, 1987), although the author was careful to point out that he was offering only one sort of history of the discipline.

Similarly, the topics that are chosen for research and discussion depend on the historical circumstances in which the research is carried out. During World War II, there was much research about the effects of propaganda, leadership, and attitude change—topics that are particularly relevant in wartime. While those topics are still studied in the field, there is much more emphasis today on studying topics of our time: cultural diversity, the open and honest exchange of information, concealment of family secrets about sexual abuse or alcoholism, and talk about the nature of family communication, when "a family" can take so many forms different from the traditional father, mother, 2.4 children, and a cat (see Chapter 7).

Finally, as we note in several chapters in the book itself, theory develops and changes as scholars labor in their studies. One of the key goals of research is precisely to make these theoretical developments and corrections to our understanding. Along with those developments and changes come differences in perspective. Such changes lead to a reevaluation of what has happened and has been assumed to be true before. Occasionally those studies that have previously been regarded as reliably "classic" are then seen in a new light that makes them less important. In their turn, the replacement "classics" also fade as new approaches and critiques become available. Therefore, the history that is written today will be different from the history that was written 50 years ago and from the history that will be written 50 years from now.

Rather than offering any hope of a definitive history of the discipline, we regard that task as beyond our means and intentions. It is also a theoretical impossibility in the first place. We intend instead to offer at best some *histories* of communication studies or at least some ways of understanding how the discipline came to look the way it does (. . . from our point of view!).



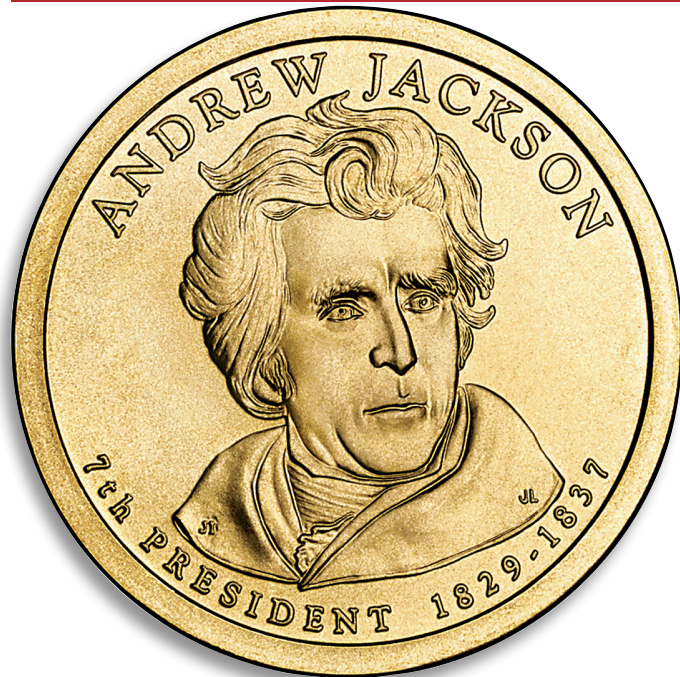
## Focus Questions



- What are four traditional areas of communication studies?
- What are the four major approaches to the study of communication?
- What is the social scientific approach to communication?
- What is the interpretivist approach to communication?
- What is the critical approach to communication?
- What is the post-modernism approach to communication?

## What Is Communication?

Department heads often report that one of their major problems is educating the dean of the college about the exact nature of communication! There is such a large range of curriculum, courses, topics, approaches, and issues that can be included. Yet in order to give any kind of history of communication studies at all, it is necessary to have some idea of what it is that is being reported on. It is instructive to look at the Wikipedia entry for “Communication Studies” to understand the problem ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication\\_studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication_studies)). You will find from starting at this link and following up the links given on the Wikipedia page, that across the country the following are listed as key topics for communication studies: the sharing of symbols over distances in space and time; face-to-face conversation; speeches to mass media outlets; television broadcasting; how audiences interpret information; political, cultural, economic, and social dimensions of speech and language. According to the Wikipedia site listed here,



**Photo 15.1** What term is used to denote the study of how histories are written, such as the history of Andrew Jackson?

Source: United States Mint.

The field is institutionalized under many different names at different universities and in various countries, including “communications,” “communication studies,” “speech communication,” “rhetorical studies,” “communications science,” “media studies,” “communication arts,” “mass communication,” “media ecology,” and sometimes even “mediology.” Communication studies often overlaps with academic programs in journalism, film and cinema, radio and television, advertising and public relations and performance studies.

We will come to this later in the chapter when we discuss the different departmental structures and forms of curriculum that are represented as sufficing for a communication studies degree.

Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication\\_studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communication_studies)) goes on to note that

in the United States, the National Communication Association (NCA) recognizes nine distinct but often overlapping sub-disciplines within the broader communication discipline: Communication & Technology; Critical-Cultural; Health; Intercultural-International; Interpersonal-Small Group; Mass Communication; Organizational; Political; and Rhetorical. The International Communication Association (ICA) recognizes a much larger and evolving list of sections, including among others Communication History; Communication Law and Policy; Ethnicity and Race in Communication; Feminist Scholarship; Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies; Global Communication and Social Change; Information Systems; Instructional/Developmental Communication; Journalism Studies; Language and Social Interaction; Organizational Communication; Philosophy of Communication; Political Communication; Popular Communication; Public Relations; and Visual Communication Studies.



**Photo 15.2** In this photo, Thomas Edison demonstrates the phonograph, forerunner (sort of) of the iPod, but much harder to put in your pocket unobtrusively. Why has the study of such technologies been comparatively slow to develop in the discipline of communication?

Source: Brady-Handy Photograph Collection (Library of Congress).

Um . . . if the two major national/international associations for the discipline cannot agree on what is the subject matter of the discipline, then how can a history of the subject be written? Well obviously it cannot. *Histories* can be written and will reflect the biases of authors, but all of them will be based on some established traditions in the discipline that everyone agrees are influential in the formation of the discipline.



## Different Traditions in Communication Studies

### The Rhetorical Tradition

Many scholars trace the field of communication studies to the work of ancient rhetoricians who taught the art of speaking in public and legal argumentation. To a perhaps surprising extent this took them also into the philosophical implications that came from some of the techniques used in making truthful and persuasive arguments. We may think of some of the key names in rhetoric and public speaking as *philosophers* first (for example, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates). In their times, rhetoric and philosophy were intricately connected with arguments about truth and reality, exaggeration, and persuasion. At the root was the question of the extent to which an orator could legitimately use what today we would simply call “spin” in order to represent the strongest case and win the argument (the beginnings of the discussion of moral philosophy). Should an orator stick to what is “true” or stray into what may be “persuasive” but perhaps stretch the truth a little? Should attorneys try to win cases by whatever means will work or must they be ethical, truthful, and honest even if it means they lose the case?

A history of the field that begins with this particular strand of the discipline will start normally with the work of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and the Roman politician and orator Cicero on rhetoric. All three of these famous thinkers wrote several long and influential papers or books about the nature of rhetoric, some of the philosophical underpinnings of making speeches that persuade, and the difference between truth and exaggeration. Cicero, at least, also wrote about the use of exaggeration for persuasive effects, and was as much concerned with the outcome of speaking as with its style. He is a famous exponent of triple emphasis: “I do not say he is a liar; I do not say he is a thief; I do not say he is a murderer. He is however a very bad man”. Listen for these triple structures, even in the speeches of President Obama.

The evolution of the study of rhetoric can be followed through many centuries of discussion about “good people speaking well” until the formal organization of the teachers of speech in the late 1800s. Debate and the teaching of speech were regarded as essential elements of education in that time. No educated person would want to miss out on all the training about how to give speeches to large audiences in the most persuasive fashion, and would naturally study such ancient Greek and Roman orators as part of that education. The connection of “communication” to “community” was regarded as essential to responsible membership of the civic population. A good citizen was expected to be responsibly involved in discussing and debating different

#### Strategic Communication



Students new to the study of rhetoric may not realize the value of the “ancient” writings of Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, Socrates, and others. However, we would encourage you to explore such writings. You will find, as do many students, not only engaging material but also ways to vastly improve your own communication.



**Photo 15.3** Marcus Tullius Cicero, one of the most influential political and philosophical thinkers about rhetoric. Because he spoke openly against Marc Antony, he ended up with his head, hands, and tongue nailed up in a prominent place in the Roman Forum. What topic areas studied by Cicero were obviously not shared with Marc Antony?

ideas in public forums where decisions were taken. It is a little known fact that the three Rs—which today we jokingly assume to mean reading, writing, and arithmetic—originally referred to reading, reasoning, and rhetoric.

After many exciting adventures, the study and teaching of speech and debate led to many discussions about the nature of persuasion and rhetoric. It took a turn away from the English departments and high school teachers of speech toward the formation of speech departments at major universities focused solely on the study of persuasive argument and debate. Both of these were regarded as essential elements not only in political life but also in a successful career as a lawyer. Together with the continued interest in the teaching of speech; the study of debate, forensics, and legal arguments; and the analysis of political argument and public advocacy, such departments began to extend their reach to persuasive forms of writing and other media that had arrived on the scene by that time.

From beginnings in the early 1900s, there emerged groups of scholars who created societies that over time turned into what is now the National Communication Association, on the one hand, and the International Communication Association, on the other hand. Both of these organizations hold annual meetings that draw participation of around 7,000 participants, and there is also an honor society ( $\Lambda\Pi\text{H}$ —Lambda Pi Eta) that takes its name from the three main features of persuasive argument identified by Aristotle: *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. *Logos* refers to the persuasive arrangement of the words in the speech and is the source of the word *logic*, which we expect persuasive and good speeches to follow. *Pathos* refers to the feelings that can be invoked by a speaker in an audience, for example, by telling the tragic story of a suffering

child while trying to persuade the audience to adopt a new health care proposal. *Ethos* refers to the character of the speaker and indicates that a person with great character and credibility is more likely to persuade an audience than one with low credibility. From *ethos* we derived the word *ethical*. Sometimes in discussions of persuasion, references are made to a speaker's ethical capabilities, by which is meant their "charisma" rather than their moral habits.

Rhetoricians trace their history from these sources through work on speaking to public audiences; from our point of view it is equally important that Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero also wrote famous papers about friendship and the nature of love. Particularly



in relation to ethos, ancient rhetoricians believed that establishment of a good relationship with the audience was likely to make speaking more persuasive. For this reason, they wrote papers about the nature of friendship, love, and the way in which these could be engendered—and perhaps even manipulated—by a speaker in a public forum. It is certainly true that speakers who usually try to make themselves more likable and acceptable to a public audience are also more likely to be more persuasive. There is a strong connection between a person’s *liking* of a person for a speaker and the possibility that the person will be *persuaded* by the speaker. Persuasiveness, public speaking, rhetoric—different in their origins from many points of view from interpersonal communication, nevertheless had a common theme: *relationships*. The rhetorical tradition therefore can be summarized as dealing with **persuasion**. Is all communication “persuasive”? Some would say yes and some no.

## Media Studies and Mass Communication

One group that would be likely to say no consists of those who originally started the study of mass media. At first they were very strongly of the opinion that they were studying the distribution of information—that is to say, facts. Take your pick of these two views of the relative influence of different cultures on mass media:

1. “Mass Media incorporates all those mediums through which information is distributed to the masses. These include advertisements, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet. Although some media may have originated in the Europe, the mass distribution and development of most mass mediums occurred in the United States” (Sebastian, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/13499/the\\_history\\_of\\_mass\\_media\\_in\\_america.html?cat=27](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/13499/the_history_of_mass_media_in_america.html?cat=27)). (You can tell that this was written before Facebook and Twitter.)
2. “History of mass media can be traced back to the early days of dramas that were performed in various cultures. However, the term Mass Media originated with the print media that was also its first example. The first newspaper was printed in China 868 A.D, but due to the high cost of paper and illiteracy amongst people,



**Photo 15.4** Can a relational perspective be applied when speaking to a large group or only when speaking with a friend, romantic partner, or family member?

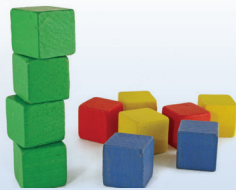
Source: ©iStockphoto.com/Cimmerian.

it didn't prosper. Regarding the origin of the Mass Media, Europe can boast to be the primary source. It was Johannes Gutenberg, who for the first time printed a book in a printing press in 1453" (<http://www.buzzle.com/articles/history-of-mass-media.html>).

Notice that these definitions do not write about communication as persuasion but communication as the distribution of information, even though some of that distribution is advertising, which these days we would count as a persuasive activity.

Media theorists can also claim to have sprung both from psychology and from sociology, as well as from technology as point-to-point telegraph communication was secretly replaced by wireless communication developed between ships in the Department of the Navy in the early 1900s. This latter was a form of communication that does not meet a strict standard of being "mass" communication, but it was not thought of that way in the first place. It was simply a wireless way of transmitting point-to-point signals that did not involve the telegraph. It was only later when the invention of the vacuum tube allowed radio to wireless telephony, replacing the dots and dashes of Morse code with human voices, that its potential as a form of mass communication was eventually realized. It was then the ultimate basis for subsequent development of public radio, the introduction of TV, and now the Internet and all that has followed from it, such as Facebook, Twitter, and IM or text messaging. The telephone—like Facebook, Twitter, and other media—has had an unmistakable effect on relationships and how we think of them.

### Make Your Case



Do you think Facebook and Twitter are an advantage to you or not? What prospects do you see happening in the future—since

you too are part of history that is still unfolding—and what would you like the future of communication studies to be?

In the modern world, media use cannot be separated from relationships. Can media really be separated from persuasion?

We saw that rhetoric began with the ancient Greek concern over persuasion but even then a major factor was ethos or the character and likability of a persuader. Likewise, the study of mass communication focused on the speech of "one to many." Advertisers soon became aware of the need for a speaker to be liked (note how many advertisements are presented by well-known, popular actors and sports stars).

### Size of Audience

We also discover that nowadays—and indeed during its continued development—most people use this developing mass technology for relational purposes. So wherever you start to trace the history of the field of communication, whether from interpersonal, public address, mass communication, or performance—and certainly in studying communication, in everyday life—you end up with . . . relationships.

Mass communication and media studies can be differentiated somewhat, although it is very often the case that they overlap considerably. A broad distinction between



mass communication and the kind of communication studied by rhetoricians is the *size of the audience*. Whereas the audience for a rhetorician may be as large as an enormous crowd, limited only by the distance to which the rhetorician's voice can carry, mass communication involves many times more people. Such an audience can be as large as the whole population of a country or the whole audience for a radio or TV program, or even a particular culture that is being assaulted by competing views of events by different sides in a war. During the Spanish-American War, there were significant attempts to influence the Spanish-speaking population that was in dispute, and through whom the United States sought to draw a boundary (Hayes, 2000). Nowadays the audience is the whole world that has access to YouTube.

### *Effect of Particular Media*

Another distinction between rhetoric and media studies, which is where the distinction becomes somewhat blurred, is that media studies may be concerned with the techniques that are used in a particular medium in order to distribute the message. What are the differences between communication through a newspaper article, on a radio program, through TV, or by Twitter?

An essential question at this point is the influence of the medium on the message. Do people communicate differently when they are speaking on a radio program or sending a Twitter message, and are their intentions the same or different? One of the most famous users of radio was President Franklin Roosevelt, who developed the style of "fireside chat." He attempted to create a friendly and intimate atmosphere by beaming his presidential voice into the living rooms of small groups of listeners clustered around the family radio set. Clearly, although he sought to address the whole of America, he was trying to do so through a familiar, almost intimate, style of speech (Hayes, 2000).

Another question that may be raised is, what counts as a medium that media studies would investigate? In most cases the solution involves distinguishing the effects on mass audiences of printed words, radio, and television. Much more recently scholars have worked on the kinds of television programs that are bought and sold between different nations (Havens, 2003). Some media scholars study the nature of "reality TV" (Andrejevic, 2004) and its consequent implicit approval of the observation of everyday behavior by outside—very often, political—bodies for surveillance (Andrejevic, 2007). Did you realize that in watching others in reality TV shows, you are implicitly accepting the notion of surveillance?

A paradox, then, is that the original uses of much technology were helpful in connecting a particular speaker with a mass audience on more or less intimate terms. Nowadays uses of technology are very often more sinister. They involve the alienation of the individual from the political oligarchy (elite), which tends to have access to enormous amounts of surveillance data about the individuals making up the society. This is particularly true of CMC (computer mediated communication), which is studied by many researchers of mass media. The fact that computers can be used to access other people on Facebook is balanced by the fact that your shopping habits online can be stored by advertisers and retailers and shared between them. Google has developed for reading the content of your messages on Gmail so that next time you use the service, you will find advertisement techniques screen on your that are relevant to the content of your earlier correspondence. Try typing in a random message such as "monkey jungle

adventure vegetable service travel egg” and see what sorts of advertisements appear beside your Gmail account next time you use it. When we tried it, we got at least one advertisement for safari travel adventure holidays, and a lot else beside.

The advantages of radio broadcasting were used during the Great Depression to lift the spirits of the American people and give them the message that life would improve and that the nation would come together and get through its troubles. Nowadays many people are concerned that the sponsors of technology are using it in a way that is detrimental to the people. Huge databanks of personal information such as Social Security numbers, credit card numbers, bank details, tax information, phone numbers, and demographic information about age, race, gender, and even sexual orientation are now stored on massive computers. People spend a considerable amount of time and money on antivirus programs designed to protect that information from being stolen from the personal computers that we use.

Equally, the early uses of radio sets did not rely on literacy or nationality. Announcers could be selected to speak clearly and intelligently in regional accents on

The term *broadcasting* was originally derived from agriculture, and referred to the fact that a farmer could cast seeds such as wheat, barley, or corn broadly, carrying the supply of seed in a basket and using a skillful flick of the wrist to spread it across the field, walking up and down several times in different parts of the field in order to complete the job.

local stations. In special cases where cities had large populations of recent foreign immigrants, radio stations often transmitted programs in foreign languages, so that the listeners did not even need to speak the same language as their neighbors. On the one hand, radio could be a medium that brought people together in times of depression or crisis. It could therefore create a sense of common purpose or membership or common suffering through which people would survive together. On the other hand, radio could also

serve to drive people apart. In both cases, its effects were relational, being either inclusive or exclusive.

### *TV Broadcasting Versus Cable*

It is far too simple to jump from the use of radio broadcasting to other forms of broadcasting and the more recent concept of cable TV without deeper analysis. Nevertheless, the growth of one to the other was most strongly facilitated by the economic underpinning of *advertising*. The social consequences created by the commercial enterprises supported the broadcast networks. The move to cable television—which is seen by some media analysts as a move from broadcasting to “narrowcasting”—depended on people being willing to pay for exclusive access to certain kinds of material and being driven in part by the frantic hope that the advertising would go away. (Good luck.)

The economic underpinnings of all the technological and mass audience communications should never be overlooked. They are a major area of study in those departments and schools that specialize in radio and television, because commercial forces have an influence on the kinds of programs that get shown (Havens, 2003).



## Performance

As noted earlier, speech and drama are among the oldest disciplines of study in Western civilization. In many societies, the recitation of favorite long poems memorized by the poet or performer and the presentation of plays in the theater were a demonstration and reinforcement of morality. Many religions place strong emphasis on thorough study or even memorizing of a particular holy book. In some cases, word-perfect memory of sacred texts is to be recited to audiences by those priests and elders who have committed them to memory.

In ancient oral cultures, Society's Secret Agents were playwrights and actors who represented, to as large a theater audience as could be accommodated, moral and ethical dilemmas. The point of the play was to show the consequences that befell those people who ignored the instructions of the gods. Early playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides portrayed such critical dilemmas as whether a citizen has the right to disobey civil authority when it tries to enforce essentially unethical activity. For example, in the play *Antigone*, where King Creon denies Antigone the right to bury her brothers who have been killed in a rebellion, the author raises the question of when it is right to resist state authority.

Theater performances allowed the representation of these dilemmas to the citizens in a way that was intended to provoke discussion and debate. In some cases the themes and depictions of these dilemmas were so provocative that they led to the exile of playwrights and poets. For example, the Roman poet Ovid was exiled for his claims about the erotic side of human character and his tendency to write about love at a time when Emperor Augustus was having a strong drive to improve public morals.

Theatrical and poetic performances (therefore and remember that poetry was written to be performed and read out to an audience rather than simply read to oneself), could lead to political and personal sacrifice. In much the same way, many theater writers and performers today aim to provoke and sustain critique of the existing political order. In these cases, theater and performance can be seen as a dramatic attempt to confront dominant political ideologies. This critical aspect of performance is something that is given great attention in communication studies and is an area where resistance to authority is sometimes a key message of a particular communication (see **Critical Approaches**, later this chapter).

At a more personal level of interaction with society, and as demonstrated in Chapter 5 of the hard copy of the book, people *perform* an identity and do so under various forms of constraints and circumstances. This performance is enacted within a set of social cultural boundaries that limit their performance and with which other people “go along” for society to work at all (Goffman, 1959). What we see as individual action is often not so much one person's free will, but is in fact a team effort to construct and maintain everyone's social face and position. Cultures work together in order to sustain the particular performances of individuals. Indeed the chapter on culture (Chapter 8 in *The Basics of Communication* and Chapter 11 in *Communication in Everyday Life*) indicates that speech itself can create “cultures as codes,” an increasingly popular topic of study in the discipline itself.

“Soaps” or “soap operas” were originally given that name because they ran during the afternoon when research showed that women were more likely to be watching than men, and it was assumed that “housewives” would be interested in soap, washing powders, and cleaners, the original sponsors of these programs.

## Interpersonal Communication Research

The notion of a separate tradition of communication research might seem strange to some readers. Indeed, it was resisted by many people in the field who felt that *all* scholars do research and that no particular group of such people should be granted exclusive permission to use the name. In fact, it referred more to an area of the field and a style of method than to any attempts to insult scholars in general! Typically communication research was a precursor of interpersonal communication as a distinct field of study and was focused on the interpersonal processes specifically at the dyadic or group level, using social scientific methods. It was the methods, usually derived from psychology or sociology—such as experimental work or use of surveys—that characterized this type of work as a special kind of “research.”

Work in this tradition was focused on social influence, attitude change, persuasive messages, and the plans that people created in order to reduce uncertainty in interpersonal relationships. As a second line of attack, the research tried to understand the influence of “opinion leaders” on the way in which ideas were circulated within the community. This area of research became a distinct domain as a rejection of the atheoretical politically driven work of the past, on such topics as propaganda, leadership training, and indoctrination.

Influenced by many studies of persuasion and attitude change in psychology (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953), many researchers who were interested in persuasion and had received a rhetorical training began to turn from the traditional forms of rhetorical analyses (based on analysis of language and text) for investigating such processes. Instead of conducting textual analyses, they began to try to understand the structure of communicative messages and their influence on outcomes (Miller, 1980; Miller, Boster, Roloff, & Seibold, 1977). They paid particular attention to situational differences, which included different messages arranged in different ways. Such alterations to specific parts of messages could be studied in experimental labs and often drew on social psychological theories and styles of experimental research.

Evolving from a different tradition, media-oriented researchers such as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) came upon the mediating role of interpersonal relationships in mass communication almost by accident. Looking at the ways mass communication messages (such as public announcements about health) tended to persuade, these researchers discovered that the effectiveness of the message was influenced by opinion leaders. People such as the local community physician or the town mayor affected the way in which the broader community tended to accept or not accept the messages. It turned out, therefore, that rather than mass messages being, as it were, hypodermically shot into lots of individual minds at once, as some theorists had supposed, individual relationships—and in particular people who were high in ethos—tended to influence majority opinion about the nature of the message. Relationships anybody?

### *Interpersonal Communication*

One of the most influential books deriving from the social scientific and communication research developments within the discipline is Miller and Steinberg (1975), who analyzed the development of interpersonal influence. They placed emphasis on interpersonal interaction as a useful and important part of the field of communication itself.

Looking back from the point of view of 2010, it is hard to believe that people needed to be persuaded that interpersonal influence at the one-to-one level should be a major topic of interest to scholars of communication. However, the influence of Miller and Steinberg in shaping the discipline was both significant and pioneering. People of the old traditional disciplines did not immediately accept that interpersonal communication was a different kind of animal from persuasion of crowds.

Parallel developments in other disciplines began to bring social processes and interpersonal communication to the forefront for particular types of researchers. At the same time, many people with sociological training turned from an interest in mass phenomena to micro sociology and processes in small groups. Often coming at group processes from a different perspective than the interpersonal communication scholars, they were interested in the dynamics of interpersonal interaction in a larger set of people than merely the dyad (two people). Equally, not obsessed with crowds, these scholars began focusing on group decision-making in groups, of about 3 to 15. Others looked at organizational communication, or interactions between groups, on a larger scale.

At first grouped together as IPSPG (interpersonal and small group communication), interpersonal communication, small group communication, and organizational communication are now thriving separate elements of the National Communication Association and the International Communication Association. Since most of the topics that are covered in the rest of this book are indicators of the way in which this particular segment of the field has grown, we will not spend too long detailing those particular elements. However it is now possible for people to take seriously

- the question of why families keep information secret,
- the way in which self-disclosure is managed in interaction,
- the nature of everyday simple conversation,
- the strategies for making functional group decisions, and
- the kinds of mechanisms by which people conduct their daily conversations in a way that prospers their relationships.

Also, the nature of “interpersonal communication” began to expand to include a wide variety of topics, recognizing that although both are interpersonal communication, rebuke is not the same as an assertion of love, and these types of speech do different things and have different characteristics.

#### Contrarian Challenge



We have presented communication studies as having a multifarious and varied past stemming from the intercourse of several different theoretical and social forces. Do you think that makes the discipline sound as if it is something that develops on its own without the interventions of policy makers and special circumstances, or would it all have happened like this anyway?



## Configuration of Communication Departments

From consideration of the different traditions, then, it is worth observing as the next step that there are numerous different configurations for the study of the “communication” curriculum and they are not all theoretically driven. You might think that a degree in communication studies would be the same from each college but surprisingly many different ways exist to teach the subject matter. Some focus only on speech; some on media; some on interpersonal communication, PR, or business skills.

Departments follow their own traditions and experiences in teaching speech and other types of communication. Some structure their curriculum so that you must take at least one course in media criticism, one in interpersonal communication, and one in public speaking. Some are structured so that majors must specialize in an area (say TV and radio production) but take a minor in another (say media criticism).

In some cases the structure of a curriculum and the relative numbers of faculty with a particular specialism in a department can be traced to the historical power of particular individuals or donors who wanted the subject taught their way. On the other hand sometimes the grouping has resulted from the good working relationships between members of different teams. Alternatively, there may be a Department of Speech and a Journalism School separately on the same campus because of long-forgotten disputes between rival faculty, who then folded their tents and took off to set up a separate department. For example, several schools have a Department of Communication Studies that was originally a Department of Speech, Theater, and Performing Arts. In some places, the radio, TV, and film faculty upped and left, leaving the speech faculty in a separate department. There are also instances of previously separate communication departments (speech, interpersonal, organizational) being joined, by a new dean, with the previously separate Journalism and Mass Communication School into one Division of Communication.

These different configurations reflect different historical outgrowths from particular starting points in specific places. They are essential but overlooked contributors to particular historical understandings of the discipline in specific universities and colleges. A more traditional history might suggest that the discipline is driven by ideas and research alone. But this view cannot account for the different formats of communication studies departments around the country. If they had all been subject to the same historical forces and the growth of the same theoretical ideas, they would all look alike. What makes the difference in our historiography is the relevance of the interpersonal relationships between faculty members that led to the many different styles of departments and may not be evident to everyone.

It is important to recognize that many histories of “the discipline” skate over these structural differences in curriculum. Yet some readers of this chapter may be in a Speech Communication Department; some may be in a Speech and Theater Department; some may be in a School of Communication, which includes Journalism and Mass Communication as well as Rhetoric and Speech, possibly Health Communication and also Interpersonal Communication and Media Studies.

Some readers may be taking the basic course offered in their college as an introduction to the skills of good communication. This may involve preparing speeches, giving performances, practicing debate and forensic skills, learning about interpersonal

behavior, studying the influence of media on our lives as consumers, or learning about the way in which gender influences our lives. Some departments contain radio, Television, and film, whereas some colleges have communication studies separate from their School of Journalism, as well as being separate from their broadcasting and film departments.

Each of these particular ways of studying communication connects it to the other elements of education background. Each form of department is also the result of historical forces that were powerful in that particular place. In those places that emphasize speech, there may have been particularly strong speech teachers in the early years of the formation of the department. In those places where media studies is more prominent, the department may have started as an outgrowth from the Speech Department as influential professors turned their study of public speech specifically toward speeches made on the radio in the 1920s and 1930s. In many departments, speech and theater have been regarded as inseparable, and dramatic arts often involve many of the skills of rhetorical delivery. In such departments the performative aspects of behavior are emphasized, just as they may be when considering identity and self (see Chapter 5).

Another lessons that we learned in writing the book is that the basic course takes many different forms, and not every institution offers such a course. Some institutions prefer to focus on the speaking parts of communication, some on the writing parts, some on performance, and some on interpersonal behavior.

## Why Is Communication Important?

### *All Communication Studies Matter*

Many archaeologists trace the development of the human species from the point at which it came to be organized into social groups that must have been able to use symbols and primitive languages in order to cohere and survive (White, 1985). Communication is central to the conduct of society. It is a key method through which a people speaks to its gods and conducts religious ritual, forms the bonds that create boundaries between tribes and nations, and is the basis for most political and economic structuring of different branches of the human race. Likewise, and in turn, communication is affected by society, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and many political and economic forces. This two-way street between society and communication (or between community and communication, two words ultimately derived from the same etymological Latin source) makes the study of communication perhaps one of the most important elements of an educated and involved citizenship.

### Listen In on Your Own Life



Take a thoughtful look at the departments or units around your campus that have *communication* in the title; look in the campus phone directory; search your college website for *communication*.

What type of format does your institution have for the study of communication and what do you feel it understands communication to be?

“Speech and Drama are among the oldest disciplines of study in Western civilization, and they now continue to embrace the effective and creative expression of our ideas in a diversity of situations. Through either discipline comes the opportunity to understand, to assess, and to perform the essential human activity of self expression.”  
 (Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, Department of Speech and Drama  
 Web site—[http://www.trinity.edu/departments/speech\\_and\\_drama/](http://www.trinity.edu/departments/speech_and_drama/))

Because the two-way street is so wide and long, there are enormous numbers of ways in which communication can be defined and studied. Although it is traditional to divide the field along certain particular “fault lines”—such as a supposed distinction between interpersonal communication and mass media, for example, or between rhetoric and media studies—the interconnections between these different aspects are becoming at least as important as the differences. For example, there have been studies of the preference of viewers for pairs of TV newsreaders who appear to like one another (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), and con-

versely many people are influenced by their friends to watch or not to watch certain kinds of television programs (see Chapter 13 in “Communication in Everyday Life” or Chapter 10 in “The Basics of Communication”). Equally, the traditional separation of rhetoric and media studies breaks down once one begins to understand that there can be visual rhetorics, pictures, styles, or ideographs that are persuasive in themselves (remember that performers in most ads look beautiful, young, and exciting—that *ethos* helps to persuade you to want to buy what *they* have).

Our underlying theme throughout this book is that most communication contains either an explicit or implicit relational basis. The relational elements of most communication should be brought to the foreground and emphasized rather than taken for granted and overlooked. Accordingly in the discussion that follows, we will make every effort to show the way in which relationships represent some of the major legs of the communication table, upon which many kinds of intellectual feast can be served.

### *Some Relational Influences on Communication Studies and Their Histories*

There has been a historical tide of change in the means of communicating over the last 150 years and has led to new sorts of study in communication studies. Also on that tide are floating many different configurations for studying the issues of communication, each of which may have been influenced by the presence of a particularly strong-willed or far-sighted faculty member at a particular place and time. Strong schools produce smart graduates who get hired and continue the traditions of their personal mentors at new places. Equally, in earlier expansive times in colleges, star faculty may have been hired away from one institution to start a new “center” somewhere else, for which that institution then became famous.

The history of a specific department may stray from the way in which the field is generally conceived to have evolved because of these strong interpersonal influences. People still argue at conferences about the nature of the field and what it contains. There have, at various points in the history of the national organizations, been strong and vigorous debates about such things as whether to include gender studies in the discipline; whether gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender studies merit special attention; and whether communication studies is a “science” or an “art.”



Bearing all this in mind, it is important to recognize that the matters that are included in the topic of communication studies have expanded considerably over the years (Peters, 1999). Any history of communication studies can be traced from many different places starting points and origins, depending on your place of interest. Many people note that early cultures were essentially *oral* cultures, where people spoke to one another as citizens. For example, in the Greek and Roman public places, people persuaded in words that were meant to be spoken, and the majority of citizens could neither read nor write. Communication of the group was most often based on the voice, on drama or theatrical performances that both amused the citizens and also taught moral lessons. Poetry was either committed to memory and delivered as a performance or, if written down, was written only to be performed and spoken aloud to an audience.

Many of the most famous orations that have come down to us from Greece and Rome survived because they were recorded in writing for distribution (“mass communication”?) even though originally delivered orally in courts or in public meetings. Contrast this with a literate culture such as our own, where the default expectation is that everyone can both read and write. Therefore, much communication occurs in written form, where your essays are not delivered rhetorically in speech to your instructors but are e-mailed or printed out. In these past, oral cultures, people were either present when a speech was delivered or they must have heard about it from someone else—probably a friend who managed to translate the emphasis and interpret the orator’s speech in terms that would be understandable between the two friends.

Once a culture has access to written material, then a greater degree of freedom of ideas and expression becomes available, and the invention of the printing press, coupled with the subsequent increase in literacy led to many social changes, including different branches of religious thought and the resistance to uniformity of ideas that were otherwise preached from the pulpit.

People can reinforce their memories by writing down ideas and looking back at them later. An important speech can be read over again and again, rather than heard only once. The preparation and circulation of pamphlets and ideas can be increased. This can lead, as it did in early America, to political change and to the broadcasting of political messages such as the Declaration of Independence. You did not have to “be there” to have access to the text of the Declaration. It could be read in many voices to many different groups and congregations in different parts of the country simultaneously. However, these groups and congregations are likely to have discussed it amongst themselves and taken particular views of the nature of its content. The discussions would obviously have been face-to-face. The meaning and interpretation of the written text would depend on the friends, neighbors, and strangers who entered into debate about it at the time.

Think of the changes in forms of connection with other people that occur once there is a regular postal service, the electric telegraph, radio, TV, films, Internet, Facebook, Twitter, or cell phones. The nature of communication itself becomes even more complex to comprehend and document. Not only that, but the very complexity makes it so much harder to decide what to include and exclude when writing histories of communication and to decide what are critical events and what are not. However . . . ta daahh . . . unsurprisingly, all of these histories end up, for us, one way or another at the same place: with *relationships* as the underpinning. Almost any technology that you can imagine—starting with cave paintings and ending with Twitter—is eventually turned toward some *social* and *interpersonal* purpose.

## Major Perspectives

Given all the above, it is nevertheless possible to identify certain styles of research and scholarship in communication studies and to consider their basic methods of understanding what is happening when communication occurs. Although the summary that follows is necessarily superficial, it does give you some general sense of the different styles of investigation and study that you may come across while reading books on communication or pursuing your own styles of research.

According to Craig (1999) there are seven traditions in the discipline: (1) **rhetorical** (communication as practical discourse); (2) **semiotic** (communication as intersubjective activity mediated by signs); (3) **phenomenological** (communication as experience of others and otherness); (4) **cybernetic** (communication as information processing); (5) **sociopsychological** (expression interaction and influence); (6) **sociocultural** (reproduction of social order); (7) **critical** (communication as discursive reflection).

Craig's major concern was to show that communication studies derives from many sources and has very little common ground. As indicated above, there are many configurations for the discipline in different institutions, and Craig believes that there is no consistent set of topics that is recognized as the sole province of "the field of communication." Frankly, we do not gain our greatest joys from measuring the amount of "turf" that we own in a university. We are quite sure that students do not have any interest in these essentially political academic concerns. Far more important for the purposes of this book is that the reader should have a basic grasp of the different kinds of models and methods that have constituted both the sources and the endpoints of the field.

Having alerted you to Craig's broad list of different traditions, we will therefore focus on a subset of them that have had the most influence. This will help you understand the rest of the chapters as they are about the reception and formation of ideas that communication in everyday life encompasses. The work of women and people of color have been especially important in bringing these key elements of the conduct of everyday life experience to the forefront. We will try to show not only in this chapter, but in the rest of the book the influence that has been exerted by such important scholars as Brenda Allen, Julia T. Wood, Leslie A. Baxter, Stella Ting-Toomey, Judee Burgoon, and many others.

### Social Science

The social scientific approach to communication studies is very similar to a social psychological approach. It can involve laboratory experiments, precise measurements of behavior, and an emphasis on statistical numerical analysis of what is studied. It adopts what is known as a **positivist** or **post-positivist** set of assumptions that things exist independently of being perceived, but that beliefs about those objects are relevant (and can differ between individuals—a large area of psychology is devoted to the study of individual differences). The fact that people believe in something does not make it real, but the researcher can learn a considerable amount by paying attention to the way in which people express their beliefs about reality. Particularly in a social organization or in social interaction itself, the beliefs that people have about their behaviors can be at least as important as other influences.

Post-positivists believe in an essentially logically ordered universe that good theory (employing defined units; laws of interactions; propositions; empirical indicators; hypotheses) can at least come close to uncovering. Such theorists believe that there is a Truth with a capital T and that they can uncover it by relentless empirical inquiry. In this kind of social scientific method, the search is for the **causation** that underlies the universal and natural rules that govern our behavior and styles of communication.

### Assumptions

Truth exists. Truth is independent of the observer. The same Truth will be discovered by different observers using the same methods. One researcher in one institution using a particular method will discover the same facts about human nature as another researcher in another institution.

Other advantages of the social scientific approach to communication are its ability to establish numerically the patterns of certain types of activity and also, theoretically, to interpret them.

Social science tends to have standardized definitions for terms and usually (but not always) to operationalize those definitions in similar ways. This means that two different social scientists will portray or represent or measure “silence,” for example, in the same way—such as a period of five seconds or more when no one is speaking.

### Methods

Methods for investigating such approaches to communication can range from direct physiological measures of people’s responses to communicative activity (Floyd, 2004) to subjectively filled out questionnaires which ask people to report on their own experiences (Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991).

The methods may involve manipulation of subjective experience during the course of a laboratory experiment (Duck, Pond, & Leatham, 1994; Floyd, 2004). They can also be simple assessments of subjective experience or ratings of other people’s behaviors using standard measures such as number of occurrences during a fixed period of time. For example, Dindia (1987) measured the numbers of interruptions of men on the one hand and women on the other hand during a fixed period of conversation.

### Advantages

There is often strong agreement between different types of social scientist about the way in which assessments can be made of behavior. The statistical analyses take the experimenter or investigator out of the equation and do not allow subjective interference in the interpretation of results.

One of the main advantages of the social scientific approach is its ability to explain the pattern theoretically and to derive new predictions from previous work. On the whole, the goal of social science is to make generalizations or at least to explain as much of the “variance” as possible. (“Variance” is a technical term referring to the variation that happens whenever you measure anything. Scientists wish to be able to explain the amounts of variance to a greater extent than would be possible by using guesswork alone. For example, if they take lots of measurements of people’s height and find that there are large variations, they would be pleased if they could find that sex explained a large part of the range of difference, with men on the whole being taller than women on the whole.)



The main advantage of the social scientific approach, however, is its ability to get at cause-effect relationships and ultimately to make predictions about them in untried circumstances.

### Disadvantages

Some scholars are skeptical about whether this approach amounts to anything except agreements between an exclusive club of people who share the same vocabulary. Others object that the experimenter imposes too much interpretative restriction on subjects' reports. For example, the construction of a questionnaire re-creates the sorts of questions that the investigator wishes to ask, but these may be the wrong questions. In that case, the investigator will never get to the subjective experience that is intended to be understood.

Equally, there are those people who do not see that generalizations are particularly useful. For example, it may be extremely useful to know that it will rain in the Midwest with a 75% probability, but does that mean I should put my umbrella up when I go out in Iowa City specifically? Also, what is a 75% probability in reality? It sounds very precise, but it's really just another way of guessing that something is a bit more likely to happen than not. A 50% chance of snow means "Toss a coin with 'Heads= Snow' and half the time you'll be right." It's not a forecast. It's a guess dressed up to look precise.

### Interpretivist

Interpretivism represents a reaction to the "detached objectivism" of the social scientific approach. The main goal of interpretivists is to understand the experience of the subject, rather than to objectify it. Such scholars turn toward the subjective and personal meanings of individuals and so tend to emphasize *hermeneutics* and *interpretation*. Hermeneutics, particularly as suggested by Gadamer (1981), took the view that communication, whether in written or spoken form, should be understood in the light of the researcher's theoretical knowledge.

Any form of expertise implies a set of expectations based on special knowledge and vocabulary. Therefore any researcher *necessarily interprets* whatever is observed. From this point of view, then, neutrality cannot exist and so no "scientist" can ever be truly objective.

### Assumptions

Interpretive theory rejects realism and instead believes in "nominalism" and "subjectivism." In more everyday language, interpretivists believe that it is untrue or irrelevant whether there is such a thing as objective reality out there. What is more important is the interpretations that people make about their experiences. Therefore, interpretivists are less concerned with Truth than with the names (nominalism) and understandings (subjectivism) that people give to their experiences.

Interpretivists go further and reject the notion of any underlying natural global causal laws and the concept of objectivism. In contrast to social scientific approaches, interpretive approaches completely reject the idea that research can ever be value free, and indeed they rejoice in the fact that it is not.

### Methods

We can distinguish general interpretive theory from a particular form of interpretive theory that provides a useful method: grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Generally interpretive theory believes that people create their experiences of the world through their communications with one another.

Grounded theory focuses on the methods that can be used by a researcher to make sense of all of this. Grounded theory, as its name suggests, works from the ground up, and focuses on observations grounded in data and developed systematically.

The grounded theorist will set out to observe a topic of interest and will read and reread the data on the expectation that knowledge is local, emergent, and intersubjective (i.e., is created by activity between people). Once a grounded theorist has collected data, a “constant comparison method” is used to compare other data and instances until the researcher is satisfied that a valid interpretation of the data has been obtained, especially if the person who is interpreted (usually called “the native”) agrees that the interpretation is correct.

### Advantages

Interpretive theory draws to our attention the very fact of the theory-laden nature of observation. Although any observer can claim to be “objective,” in fact everyone has their own biases and interpretative styles. Even a social scientist is trained to “observe” data in particular ways.

The very fact of training a person to become an observer of any particular kinds of phenomena is what makes it impossible to be objective, because any comments that are assumed to be objective are in fact derived from the training. People are trained to overlook certain kinds of things and to focus on others. Objectivity is therefore defined in terms of the training that a discipline offers about the objects and concepts that count and those that do not. In essence, interpretivism asks whether it is meaningfully possible to separate the knower and the known.

Many objects or occurrences are not naturally observed, but researchers can be trained to include them in their observations. Physicians get trained not to get emotionally involved with the bodies that they service, but to see them as objects, even if they are also trained to do so humanely—at least these days.

### Disadvantages

“Data” is a problematic concept for interpretive theory—even grounded and inductive theory—since the approach assumes that data cannot be found in a value-free fashion. There is an assumption that anything “real” in the world must reveal itself to an interpreter, and such an interpreter must be trained to recognize it, which makes the whole concept circular rather than a solution.

Another question raised by all styles of approach, but particularly in this one, is the role of ethics in a theory’s selection and in the methods of study. Is it more important to have answers to any kinds of questions or to ask and address meaningful questions? What is the role of generativity in theory? Is theory “about” answers, questions, or creating new ideas? If the latter, then what is the ultimate goal of theory? The interpretivist seems to be satisfied with answers only to questions that already exist and does not go searching for new questions to ask.

Finally, interpretivism must be able to answer the question of whether there can be general interpretation of individual understanding. Doesn't the hermeneutical approach presume some general principles for understanding what someone means? Does interpretive work commit us to essentially individual levels of analysis without the possibility of making any general understandings of human nature possible at all?

## Critical Approaches

Critical theorists take the interest of interpretivists in naming and meaning one step further. They point out that naming is a crucial act, which gives people the words not only to identify but also to value, to privilege, or to question taken-for-granted aspects of communication.

Critical theory takes as its starting point that certain types of members of society have a greater ability to impose their values and establish the nature of taken-for-granted aspects of society than do other people. Feminist theorists, for example, are particularly concerned to point out the nature of **patriarchy** in society (i.e., the tendency for the order in society to give men more power than women). This type of order is typically the structure of various societies, which, over the course of history, have tended to subjugate women or to give them praise and status for relatively trivial activities as compared to those done by men and valued overall in the society.

The main goal of critical theories is to identify the hidden but powerful structures and practices that create or uphold disadvantage, inequity, or oppression of one subgroup of society by any other.

In particular, critical theorists focus on the struggles between different ideologies, or sets of ideas, that serve to create and organize any society's general understanding of reality. The central issue for most critical theorists is therefore the issue of **power** and how it is used and resisted.

### Assumptions

Critical theorists assume that there is an inbuilt structure in society that gives advantage to one set of people rather than another. This oppression and advantage is transacted or exercised through communication as well as through other means. The theorists are therefore interested in the concept of power as an absolute entity, but are particularly concerned over its use to oppress and devalue minority groups. Many critical theorists are allied with the various forms of a feminist critique and therefore are also concerned with exposing the ways in which women's contributions to society are minimized, trivialized, overlooked, or reduced in value (Wood, 2001).

Critical theorists will often use the terms *language* and *voice* to describe the communication that takes place in everyday life. Groups of people can be "given voice" to express their thoughts feelings and experiences and to convey those to others, or can be repressed and refused the opportunity to "be heard." Another concern of some critical theorists is that only certain types of experiences are valued and expressed in a given society precisely because of the power dynamics that are contained in that society. The dominant voice and style is usually referred to as the **hegemonic discourse**—that is to say, the prevailing style of talk and understanding that is current and dominant in the particular society.



Critical scholars are interested in the discovery and encouragement of the expression of other languages and voices than those that are the norm in a particular group.

### *Methods*

The methods used in critical theory are very similar to those used in interpretive approaches. Wood (2001), for example, used face-to-face in-depth interviews with women who had been in violent romantic relationships. She was interested in clarifying the way in which “gender” was represented in their stories. Decisions about the themes that emerged from these stories and interviews were taken according to standard methodology for interpretive techniques, such as repeated reading of the material until themes began to “stand out.”

Other work of a critical kind can involve analysis of texts rather than interviews and is intended to bring out and demonstrate the way in which power relationships between people are enacted in writing and speaking. Critical theorists are looking for the hidden undertones of particular forms and styles of speech or writing and in indicating the way in which power dynamics are transacted. West (2007), for example, did an analysis of cookbooks and the way in which they were used both to raise money for pacifist causes and to critique the Vietnam War.

### *Advantages*

Critical theory has been very important in redirecting the thinking of communication scholars away from traditional public topics and more toward the awareness of inequities in society at large.

By encouraging a significantly increased awareness of the way in which scholarship is conducted and the way in which everyday life itself is conducted, critical theorists have encouraged us not only to identify inequalities but also to make it our goal to eradicate them. To the extent that the theorists are able to be successful in this venture, then people in future will participate equally in relationships, and invest and benefit equitably from their communication in everyday life.

### *Disadvantages*

One of the problems faced by critical theory is that, precisely because of its stance, it runs into the criticism that it is giving itself power rather than simply discovering the misuse of power by other people. The nature of the discipline is itself a rhetorical construction of its own disciplinary authority. That is to say, the discipline of communication studies gives itself its own power to comment about the way in which communication is used. Are we really that important? Are the critical theorists giving themselves more of an egotistical buzz when they place themselves at the center of social change than in fact is justified by the way in which they are perceived by others?

A less insulting critique of critical theory is that it should also place some emphasis on the way in which power is accepted. For example, a strict military discipline of the Roman army was not regarded as unreasonable or oppressive, but was voluntarily accepted by the people as part of the system. Compare and contrast the 18th-century British Navy, where resistance to military discipline was much stronger, and where much of the change was brought about by those in charge who were offended by what they saw rather than by those underneath whose refusal of deference caused a change.

Although critical theorists claim that they seek to reform the patriarchal ideologies that give rise to oppression, as well as the asymmetrical rights, opportunities, roles, and so forth, critical theory grounds itself the right to identify the nature of “inequity.” What sorts of inequity matter more than others and what is the extent of the possibility of their elimination? Who should decide who makes the call?

## Postmodernism

Postmodernists do not believe that there is a capital-T truth that can be represented in the descriptions of scientists. Instead, they see there being different kinds of truths from different points of view, some of which are privileged by the hegemonic discourses identified by the critical theorists. Essentially, however, they believe that science as usually conceived is simply a game where different discourses are employed to credit certain types of viewpoint over others.

### *Assumptions and Methods*

Mumby (1997) has attempted to identify four different systems by which communication scholars play “games of truth” that shape what we count and how we represent topics.

- 1) **Discourse of representation.** This discourse makes communication essentially a neutral language of description and is the one preferred by the social science perspective described previously. Mumby points out that this outlook regards communication as a simple neutral channel through which messages are conveyed and it overlooks the way in which communication may be a shaper or constituter of power and resources.
- 2) **Discourse of modernism and interpretivism (understanding).** In this understanding of communication, the mind does not simply reflect what is out there in nature but contributes something to the understanding of nature itself. Because the thought and reflection involved in this process necessarily involve mediation, this discourse shifts attention from the mind to language and puts reason and truth in dialogues with others, making truth something that is established by consensus with other people. At the same time, Mumby points out that this discourse misses the ways in which dialogue can be systematically distorted through enmeshment in the structures of power.
- 3) **Discourse of suspicion.** This form of communication is based on the suspicion that there may be three kinds of rationality: (1) technical (money, power, media); (2) practical (oriented to understanding); (3) emancipatory (self-reflection and freedom from the system). From this point of view, truth is created from disagreements ultimately turned into consensus by resolution of antitheses. By considering the different ways in which truth may result from thoughtful examination of power and its reproduction, it is possible for individuals to free themselves from the system of oppression.
- 4) **Discourse of vulnerability.** This discourse assumes that the individual will always lose any attempt to gain authority and simply looks at how truth claims are based on an individual’s position without making any attempt to separate truth and

power. From this point of view, all communication is political, and it is necessarily the case that some views of the world are given privilege over others.

### Advantages

This perspective does not fall into the trap of thinking that there is only one way to do things that is held exclusively by scientists. Postmodernism recognizes that there are multiple perspectives on different issues and multiple ways in which those issues could be interpreted and understood. Postmodernism is also fully aware of the nature of the influence of power on the construction of knowledge and the fact that society prefers certain types of knowledge to be disseminated and regarded as truth rather than other types of knowledge.

### Disadvantages

The postmodernist objects to the privileging of one discourse over another, but this means that it seeks to show ways in which this is done unknowingly; otherwise, no decisions can ever be made between views. The *reductio ad absurdum* of postmodernism is the reflexivity issue: if any theory should explain its own authorship, then postmodernity should be able to explain postmodern theory. However, if its own claims apply also to itself, then its position is untenable because it privileges itself over other views, yet by its own claims should not do so. It is rather similar to the famous ancient Greek paradox: is this statement true or false if spoken by a Cretan—“All Cretans are liars”?

## Future of Communication and the Relational Perspective

All history writing tends to assume that everything stops at the present. It also tends to assume that the present is the way that things *should* be, as a result of the “logical unfolding” of developments that are described in the history itself. This method of writing history all too often overlooks the contingencies with which history is faced. That is to say that there are many occasions in the development of a discipline when things could have gone one way or another. Candidate B could have been elected president of the national society instead of Candidate A and taken it in a different direction. An editor could have decided to reject what subsequently became a key manuscript in a particular line of argument. Assuming that the development of the discipline has not yet finished, then we must assume it is still continuing. If the discipline of communication studies has not evolved to a final state of perfection as a result of previous historical and intellectual forces, then where is it to go next?

If you do not already know our answer to this question, then our lives have not been worthwhile ☹. We are unable to see any area of communication studies to which a relational approach could not be taken. The chapters that are represented in *Basics of Communication* and *Communication in Everyday Life* are the traditional topics studied by undergraduates in communication majors and basic courses nationwide. We have been able to give all of these topics a relational twist and to show that underneath all of

these traditional topics lies a presumption about the nature of personal relationships and their influence in everyday life.

The future of the discipline as far as we can see it is to apply our relational approach even more broadly, to media studies, to studies of conflict, to the workplace and organizations, and even to teaching of kindergarten and relational life skills as part of the ordinary school curriculum. We hope that our overview in this chapter and the chapters in the other books convince enough people to take our particular view of the topic and to push forward for those social changes that are necessary to make the future foreseen in this chapter become a reality.

## Focus Questions Revisited

### **What are four traditional areas of communication studies?**

Four traditional areas of communication studies include rhetoric, performance, media, and interpersonal.

### **What are the four major approaches to the study of communication?**

The four major approaches to the study of communication are social scientific, interpretivist, critical, and post-modernism.

### **What is the social scientific approach to communication?**

The social scientific approach believes in the existence of a single reality that causes people to communicate in predictable ways, thereby enabling communication to be studied empirically.

### **What is the interpretivist approach to communication?**

The interpretivist approach does not believe that a single reality exists but rather believe that multiple realities are created symbolically, thereby requiring communication to be studied in a subjective manner.

### **What are critical approaches to communication?**

Critical approaches focus on how power is constructed, challenged, and maintained through communication, thereby seeking to identify the hidden but powerful structures and practices that create or uphold disadvantage, inequity, or oppression of one subgroup of society by any other.

### **What is the post-modernism approach to communication?**

Post-modernism believe that science as usually conceived a game in which different discourses are employed to credit certain types of viewpoint over others, thereby seeking to identify systems in which communication scholars play “games of truth” that shape what counts as knowledge.



## Key Concepts

Causation	Phenomenological approaches to communication
Critical approaches to communication	Positivist or post-positivist approaches to communication
Cybernetic approaches to communication	Power
Discourse of representation	Presentation
Discourse of suspicion	Representation
Discourse of vulnerability	Rhetorical approaches to communication
Hegemonic discourse	Semiotic approaches to communication
Historiography	Socio-cultural approaches to communication
ΛΠΗ—Lambda Pi Eta	Socio-psychological approaches to communication
Low credibility	
Patriarchy	
Persuasion	

## Questions to Ask Your Friends

- Ask your friends how they would define communication studies. How do their definitions compare with the histories offered in this chapter?
- Ask your friends if they believe a single reality, external to human beings, exists or if they believe human beings create their own realities. Would their response make them more of a social scientist or more of an interpretivist?
- Ask your friends if they would stretch the truth on a first-date assuming it would guarantee the date went well and that they would never be found out. Do they believe it more important to tell the absolute truth even if it means the date will not go well? Many people are on their “best behavior” during a first-date and may not communicate like they normally do so. Do your friends believe this qualifies as being untruthful?

## Media Links

- Watch or listen to a news broadcast. What elements of rhetoric can be studied? What elements of media can be studied? What elements of interpersonal communication can be studied? How might a relational perspective of communication be used to bridge these areas of study?
- Watch or listen to a political speech. What elements of rhetoric can be studied? What elements of media can be studied? What elements of interpersonal communication can be studied? How might a relational perspective of communication be used to bridge these areas of study?

- Watch a television sitcom. How are male and female characters portrayed? In what ways are traditional gender roles being upheld? Watch carefully! Even when it appears as if traditional gender roles are being challenged, these traditional roles are often being reinforced.

## Ethical Issues

- The disadvantages of the social scientific method included weather as an example. When a meteorologist predicts a 75% chance of rain, he or she is also predicting a 25% chance that it will not rain. So, the meteorologist is “correct” regardless of whether it rains or does not rain. Is it ethical for a meteorologist to claim a perfect record of prediction? Would it be ethical for a communication scholar to claim absolute knowledge about communicative behavior?
- Is it ethical for a communication scholar to claim a particular group is wrong because inequality may exist in their communication styles or social structure? A reasonable person would easily point out that unequal treatment based on gender, race, religion, or sexuality is wrong. However, how far should scholars and society for that matter take issues of power? For instance, certain children may be physical stronger than others on the playground. Should measures be taken to ensure that all children, regardless of strength or ability, be somehow placed on equal footing? What if the scenario is moved from the playground to the classroom or workplace?
- The National Communication Association Credo for Ethical Communication can be found at the following address: <http://www.natcom.org/index.asp?bid=514>. Do you agree with this credo? Would you add, remove, or alter any of the statements? How might this ethical credo be specifically applied to the study of rhetoric, media, or interpersonal communication?

## Answers to Photo Captions

**Photo 15.1** ■ The term historiography denotes the study of the persuasive effect of writing history, in particular ways and the reasons why particular kinds of reports and analyses are offered by specific kinds of authors.

**Photo 15.2** ■ One reason why the study of such technologies has been comparatively slow to develop in the discipline of communication is that their study can be placed in most if not all subdisciplines. There is a tendency for scholars within subdisciplines to remain segregated from others. Consequently, scholars from separate subdisciplines may not realize they are studying the same area, preventing the sharing of research. An even more dire consequence, sometimes scholars assume the study a topic—such as a relational technology like an iPod—rests within the domain of another subdiscipline, resulting in the topic being overlooked because scholars think other people are studying it or think that the topic is out of their area of expertise. Approaching such topics from a relational perspective could remedy many of these issues.

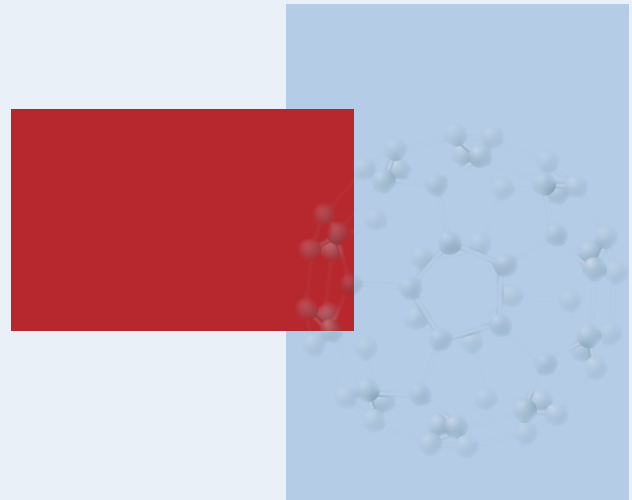
**Photo 15.3** ■ Cicero and Marc Antony certainly did not share friendship and love. In Cicero's defense, it is difficult to talk about friendship and love with a sharp object through one's tongue.

**Photo 15.4** ■ A relational perspective can be applied to all communicative situations, not just dyadic interactions among people sharing a close, personal relationship.

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# Glossary

**causation:** the relation of cause and effect, most often sought by **positivists** and **post-positivists**

**critical approaches:** treat communication as discursive reflection; that is to say critical theorists point out that naming is a crucial act, which gives people the words not only to identify but also to value, to privilege, or to question taken-for-granted aspects of communication

**cybernetic approaches:** assume that communication is simple, somewhat mechanical, information processing, in the way that a computer might process information

**discourse of representation:** makes communication essentially a neutral language of description and is the one preferred by the “social science perspective”

**discourse of suspicion:** from this point of view, truth is created from disagreements ultimately turned into consensus by resolution of antitheses

**discourse of vulnerability:** assumes that individuals are relatively powerless and it examines truth claims as based on an individual’s position in a power structure

**hegemonic discourse:** the prevailing style of talk and understanding current and dominant in the particular society. Typically it favors the way things presently are, and also serves men and their interests

**historiography:** studies the *persuasive or rhetorical* effect of writing history in particular ways, from particular standpoints. It considers carefully the reasons why particular kinds of reports and analyses are offered by specific kinds of authors

**ΑΠΗ—Lambda Pi Eta:** an honor society for communication studies that takes its acronym from three elements of persuasive argument identified by Aristotle: logos (word), pathos (feeling), and ethos (character of speaker)

**low credibility:** a speaker has low credibility when he or she is disbelieved or does not carry persuasive weight or does not seem “warranted” to make the claims that he or she makes

**patriarchy:** a set of beliefs or cultural practices that, in effect, gives preference to men and grants them a dominant role over women, whether explicitly or implicitly.

**persuasion:** the art of changing someone else’s mind

**phenomenological approaches:** focus on communication as experience of others and the related experience of “otherness” (the sense of being an outsider)

**positivist or post-positivist approaches:** most likely to be what you think of when you think of “science.” Post positivists look for **causation**, believe in the value of objective measurement, and are number crunchers

**power:** there are several kinds of power, ranging from “legitimate power” (e.g. of a police officer to stop a suspect) to “informal power” where one person does what another respected person suggests, but all involve the ability to control the actions of another person by some means

**presentation:** one person’s particular version of, or take on, the facts or events (contrast with *representation*)

**representation:** describes facts or conveys information (contrast with *presentation*)

**rhetorical approaches:** treat communication as practical discourse, that is to say, as discourse that brings about some sort of result (like persuasion)

**semiotic approaches:** take communication as intersubjective activity mediated by signs. That is to say, this approach is based on the meaning that is conveyed by symbols that two people in a conversation both understand

**sociocultural approaches:** believe that through our communication we reinforce, reestablish, and serve to promote existing social structures and forces

**sociopsychological approaches:** are concerned with the ways in which communication serves to express emotion, regulate and continue interaction, and exert influence between one person and another













