

Introduction Communication Theory Analysis Application

Sixth Edition

Introducing
COMMUNICATION THEORY
Analysis and Application

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Education

Richard L. West | Lynn H. Turner

SIXTH EDITION

Introducing Communication Theory

ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION

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**Mc
Graw
Hill**
Education



INTRODUCING COMMUNICATION THEORY: ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION, SIXTH EDITION

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Brief Contents

Part One Foundations 1

COMMUNICATION, THEORY, AND RESEARCH

1. Thinking About Communication: Definitions, Models, and Ethics 3
2. Thinking About the Field: Traditions and Contexts 24
3. Thinking About Theory and Research 42

Part Two Understanding the Dialogue 65

THE SELF AND MESSAGES

4. Symbolic Interaction Theory 68
5. Coordinated Management of Meaning 83
6. Cognitive Dissonance Theory 104
7. Expectancy Violations Theory 119

RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

8. Uncertainty Reduction Theory 135
9. Social Exchange Theory 155
10. Social Penetration Theory 170
11. Relational Dialectics Theory 187
12. Communication Privacy Management Theory 204
13. Social Information Processing Theory 218

GROUPS, TEAMS, AND ORGANIZATIONS

14. Groupthink 237
15. Structuration Theory 255
16. Organizational Culture Theory 272
17. Organizational Information Theory 287

THE PUBLIC

18. *The Rhetoric* 306
19. Dramatism 324
20. The Narrative Paradigm 338

THE MEDIA

21. Agenda Setting Theory 355
22. Spiral of Silence Theory 369
23. Uses and Gratifications Theory 387
24. Cultivation Theory 403
25. Cultural Studies 420
26. Media Ecology Theory 436

CULTURE AND DIVERSITY

27. Face-Negotiation Theory 459
28. Communication Accommodation Theory 476

- 29. Muted Group Theory 494
- 30. Feminist Standpoint Theory 510

***Afterward* ← *ConnectingQuests* 527**

***Glossary* G-1**

***References* R-1**

***Name Index* I-1**

***Subject Index* I-11**

Contents

Preface	xvii
About the Authors	xxix

PART ONE ***Foundations*** **001**

COMMUNICATION, THEORY, AND RESEARCH

Chapter 1	Thinking About Communication: Definitions, Models, and Ethics	3
	Defining Communication	5
	Models of Understanding: Communication as Action, Interaction, and Transaction	8
	Communication as Action: The Linear Model	9
	Communication as Interaction: The Interactional Model	10
	Communication as Transaction: The Transactional Model	12
	Communication Models of the Future	13
	Ethics and Communication	14
	Business and Industry	15
	Religion and Faith	16
	Entertainment	17
	Higher Education	17
	Medicine	18
	Politics	19
	Technology	19
	Some Final Thoughts	19
	The Value of Understanding Communication Theory	21
	Understanding Communication Theory Cultivates Critical Thinking Skills	21
	Understanding Communication Theory Helps You to Recognize the Breadth and Depth of Research	21
	Understanding Communication Theory Helps to Make Sense of Personal Life Experiences	22
	Communication Theory Fosters Self-Awareness	22
	Conclusion	22
	<i>Discussion Starters</i>	23

Chapter 2

Thinking About the Field: Traditions and Contexts 24

Seven Traditions in the Communication Field 25

- The Rhetorical Tradition 26
- The Semiotic Tradition 27
- The Phenomenological Tradition 27
- The Cybernetic Tradition 28
- The Socio-Psychological Tradition 28
- The Socio-Cultural Tradition 29
- The Critical Tradition 29
- Putting It All Together 29

Seven Contexts in the Communication Field 30

- Intrapersonal Communication 30
- Interpersonal Communication 32
- Small Group and Team Communication 33
- Organizational Communication 34
- Public/Rhetorical Communication 36
- Mass/Media Communication 37
- Cultural Communication 38
- Collating the Contexts 40

Conclusion 41

Discussion Starters 41

Chapter 3

Thinking About Theory and Research 42

Defining Theory: What's in a Name? 44

- Components 45
- Goals 46

Approaches to Knowing: How Do You See (and Talk About) the World? 46

- The Positivist, or Empirical, Approach 47
- The Interpretive Approach 47
- The Critical Approach 47

Approaches to Knowing: What Questions Do You Ask About the World? 48

Approaches to Knowing: How Do We Go About Theory Building? 50

- Covering Law Approach 52
- Rules Approach 52
- Systems Approach 53
- Evaluating Theory 56

The Research Process 58

- Communication Research and the Scientific Method 58
- Communication Research and the Qualitative Approach 60

Conclusion 64

Discussion Starters 64

THE SELF AND MESSAGES

Chapter 4	Symbolic Interaction Theory	68
	History of Symbolic Interaction Theory	70
	Themes and Assumptions of Symbolic Interaction Theory	71
	Key Concepts	76
	Mind	76
	Self	77
	Society	79
	Integration, Critique, and Closing	79
	Scope	80
	Utility	80
	Testability	81
	Closing	81
	<i>Discussion Starters</i>	81
Chapter 5	Coordinated Management of Meaning	83
	All the World's a Stage	84
	Assumptions of Coordinated Management of Meaning	85
	The Hierarchy of Organized Meaning	88
	Content	89
	Speech Act	90
	Episodes	90
	Relationship	91
	Life Scripts	91
	Cultural Patterns	92
	Charmed and Strange Loops	93
	The Coordination of Meaning: Making Sense of the Sequence	95
	Influences on the Coordination Process	96
	Rules and Unwanted Repetitive Patterns	97
	Integration, Critique, and Closing	100
	Scope	100
	Parsimony	101
	Utility	101
	Heurism	102
	Closing	102
	<i>Discussion Starters</i>	102
Chapter 6	Cognitive Dissonance Theory	104
	Assumptions of Cognitive Dissonance Theory	108
	Concepts and Processes of Cognitive Dissonance	109
	Magnitude of Dissonance	109

Coping with Dissonance	110
Cognitive Dissonance and Perception	111
Minimal Justification	112
Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Persuasion	113
Integration, Critique, and Closing	115
Utility	115
Testability	117
Closing	118
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>118</i>

Chapter 7 Expectancy Violations Theory 119

Space Relations	121
Proxemic Zones	121
Territoriality	123
Assumptions of Expectancy Violations Theory	124
Arousal	127
Threat Threshold	127
Violation Valence	128
Communicator Reward Valence	129
Integration, Critique, and Closing	130
Scope	131
Utility	131
Testability	131
Heurism	131
Closing	132
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>132</i>

RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Chapter 8 Uncertainty Reduction Theory 135

Assumptions of Uncertainty Reduction Theory	138
Key Concepts of URT: The Axiom and Theorem	140
Axioms of Uncertainty Reduction Theory	140
Theorems of Uncertainty Reduction Theory	142
Expansions of Uncertainty Reduction Theory	143
Antecedent Conditions	143
Strategies	144
Developed Relationships	145
Social Media	147
Context	148
Integration, Critique, and Closing	150
Utility	151
Heurism	153
Closing	153
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>153</i>

Chapter 9	Social Exchange Theory	155
	Assumptions of Social Exchange Theory	158
	Evaluating a Relationship	161
	Exchange Patterns: SET in Action	163
	Exchange Structures	165
	Integration, Critique, and Closing	166
	Scope	167
	Utility	167
	Testability	168
	Heurism	168
	Closing	169
	<i>Discussion Starters</i>	169
Chapter 10	Social Penetration Theory	170
	Assumptions of Social Penetration Theory	172
	“Tearing Up” the Relationship: The Onion Analogy	175
	A Social Exchange: Relational Costs and Rewards	177
	Stages of the Social Penetration Process	179
	Orientation: Revealing Bit by Bit	180
	Exploratory Affective Exchange: The Self Emerges	181
	Affective Exchange: Commitment and Comfortability	182
	Stable Exchange: Raw Honesty and Intimacy	183
	Integration, Critique, and Closing	184
	Scope	184
	Heurism	185
	Closing	186
	<i>Discussion Starters</i>	186
Chapter 11	Relational Dialectics Theory	187
	Assumptions of Relational Dialectics Theory	190
	Core Concepts of Dialectics	191
	Basic Relational Dialectics	192
	Autonomy and Connection	192
	Openness and Protection	194
	Novelty and Predictability	194
	Contextual Dialectics	195
	Beyond Basic Dialectics	196
	Responses to Dialectics	198
	Integration, Critique, and Closing	200
	Parsimony	201
	Utility	201
	Heurism	201
	Closing	202
	<i>Discussion Starters</i>	202

Chapter 12

Communication Privacy Management Theory 204

Evolution of Communication Privacy Management Theory 206

Assumptions of CPM 207

Key Terms and Principles of CPM 208

Principle 1: Private Information Ownership 209

Principle 2: Private Information Control 209

Principle 3: Private Information Rules 211

Principle 4: Private Information Co-ownership and Guardianship 212

Principle 5: Private Information Boundary Turbulence 214

Integration, Critique, and Closing 214

Logical Consistency 215

Utility 216

Heurism 216

Closing 216

Discussion Starters 216

Chapter 13

Social Information Processing Theory 218

Theoretical Turbulence: The Cues Filtered Out 221

Assumptions of Social Information Processing Theory 223

Hyperpersonal Perspective: “I Like What I Read and I Want More” 227

Sender: Selective Self-Presentation 227

Receiver: Idealization of the Sender 228

Channel Management 229

Feedback 229

Warranting: Gaining Confidence Online 230

Integration, Critique, and Closing 231

Scope 232

Utility 232

Testability 233

Closing 234

Discussion Starters 234

GROUPS, TEAMS, AND ORGANIZATIONS

Chapter 14

Groupthink 237

Assumptions of Groupthink 240

What Comes Before: Antecedent Conditions of Groupthink 243

Group Cohesiveness 243

Structural Factors 244

Group Stress 245

Symptoms of Groupthink 245

Overestimation of the Group 246

Closed-Mindedness 247

Pressures Toward Uniformity 248

(Group) Think About It: It's All Around U.S.	249
Think Before You Act: Ways to Prevent Groupthink	249
Integration, Critique, and Closing	251
Scope	252
Testability	252
Heurism	253
Test of Time	253
Closing	253
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>254</i>

Chapter 15 Structuration Theory 255

Assumptions of Structuration Theory	259
Central Concepts of Structuration Theory	262
Agency and Reflexivity	262
Duality of Structure	263
Social Integration	267
Application of Time and Space	267
Integration, Critique, and Closing	268
Scope	269
Parsimony	269
Closing	270
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>270</i>

Chapter 16 Organizational Culture Theory 272

The Cultural Metaphor: Of Spider Webs and Organizations	275
Assumptions of Organizational Cultural Theory	276
Ethnographic Understanding: Laying It On Thick	279
The Communicative Performance	281
Ritual Performances	282
Passion Performances	282
Social Performances	283
Political Performances	283
Enculturation Performances	283
Integration, Critique, and Closing	284
Logical Consistency	285
Utility	285
Heurism	285
Closing	286
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>286</i>

Chapter 17 Organizational Information Theory 287

The Only Constant Is Change (in Organizations)	290
General Systems Theory	290
Darwin's Theory of Sociocultural Evolution	291

Assumptions of Organizational Information Theory	292
Key Concepts and Conceptualizing Information	294
Information Environment: The Sum Total	294
Rules: Guidelines to Analyze	295
Cycles: Act, Respond, Adjust	297
The Principles of Equivocality	298
Reducing Equivocality: Trying to Use the Information	299
Enactment: Assigning Message Importance	299
Selection: Interpreting the Inputs	300
Retention: Remember the Small Stuff	300
Integration, Critique, and Closing	301
Logical Consistency	302
Utility	303
Heurism	303
Closing	303
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>303</i>

THE PUBLIC

Chapter 18

The Rhetoric	306
The Rhetorical Tradition	308
Assumptions of the <i>Rhetoric</i>	309
The Syllogism: A Three-Tiered Argument	311
Canons of <i>Rhetoric</i>	312
Invention	312
Arrangement	314
Style	315
Memory	316
Delivery	316
Types of Rhetoric	317
Integration, Critique, and Closing	320
Logical Consistency	320
Heurism	321
Test of Time	322
Closing	322
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>323</i>

Chapter 19

Dramatism	324
Assumptions of Dramatism	326
Dramatism as New Rhetoric	328
Identification and Substance	328
The Process of Guilt and Redemption	329
The Pentad	331
Integration, Critique, and Closing	333
Scope	333
Parsimony	334
Utility	334
Heurism	336

Closing 336
Discussion Starters 337

Chapter 20 The Narrative Paradigm 338

Assumptions of the Narrative Paradigm 341
Key Concepts in the Narrative Approach 344
 Narration 344
 Narrative Rationality 345
 The Logic of Good Reasons 347
Integration, Critique, and Closing 348
 Scope 349
 Logical Consistency 349
 Utility 350
 Heurism 351
Closing 351
Discussion Starters 351

THE MEDIA

Chapter 21 Agenda Setting Theory 355

History of Agenda Setting Research 356
 Pretheoretical Conceptualizing 357
 Establishing the Theory of Agenda Setting 358
Assumptions of Agenda Setting Theory 359
Two Levels of Agenda Setting 360
Three-Part Process of Agenda Setting 361
Expansions and Refinements to Agenda Setting Theory 364
Integration, Critique, and Closing 365
 Scope 366
 Utility 366
 Heurism 367
Closing 368
Discussion Starters 368

Chapter 22 Spiral of Silence Theory 369

The Court of Public Opinion 372
Assumptions of Spiral of Silence Theory 374
The Media's Influence 377
The Train Test 379
The Hard Core 380
The Spiral of Silence and Social Media 382
Integration, Critique, and Closing 383
 Logical Consistency 384
 Heurism 385
Closing 386
Discussion Starters 386

Chapter 23 Uses and Gratifications Theory 387

Assumptions of Uses and Gratifications Theory 389

Stages of Uses and Gratifications Research 392

Media Effects 393

Key Concepts: The Audience as Active 396

**Uses and Gratifications and the Internet, Social Media,
and Cell Phones 397**

Integration, Critique, and Closing 399

 Logical Consistency 400

 Utility 401

 Heurism 401

Closing 401

Discussion Starters 402

Chapter 24 Cultivation Theory 403

Developing Cultivation Theory 406

Assumptions of Cultivation Theory 407

**Processes and Products of Cultivation
Theory 409**

 The Four-Step Process 409

 Mainstreaming and Resonance 410

 The Mean World Index 412

Cultivation Theory as Critical Theory 413

Integration, Critique, and Closing 416

 Logical Consistency 416

 Utility 417

 Heurism 417

 Test of Time 417

Closing 419

Discussion Starters 419

Chapter 25 Cultural Studies 420

The Marxist Legacy: Power to the People 423

Assumptions of Cultural Studies 424

Hegemony: The Influence on the Masses 426

**Counter-Hegemony: The Masses Start to Influence
the Dominant Forces 429**

Audience Decoding 431

Integration, Critique, and Closing 433

 Logical Consistency 433

 Utility 434

 Heurism 434

Closing 435

Discussion Starters 435

Chapter 26	Media Ecology Theory	436
	Assumptions of Media Ecology Theory	439
	Making Media History and Making “Sense”	442
	The Tribal Era	442
	The Literate Era	443
	The Print Era	443
	The Electronic Era	443
	The Medium Is the Message	444
	Gauging the Temperature: Hot and Cool Media	445
	The Circle Is Complete: The Tetrad	447
	Enhancement	448
	Obsolescence	448
	Retrieval	448
	Reversal	449
	Carrying the McLuhan Banner: Postman and Meyrowitz	450
	Integration, Critique, and Closing	452
	Testability	453
	Heurism	453
	Closing	454
	<i>Discussion Starters</i>	454
CULTURE AND DIVERSITY		
Chapter 27	Face-Negotiation Theory	459
	About Face	461
	Face and Politeness Theory	462
	Facework	463
	Assumptions of Face-Negotiation Theory	464
	Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures	466
	Face Management and Culture	469
	Managing Conflict Across Cultures	470
	Integration, Critique, and Closing	472
	Logical Consistency	472
	Heurism	473
	Closing	474
	<i>Discussion Starters</i>	474
Chapter 28	Communication Accommodation Theory	476
	Social Psychology and Social Identity	478
	Assumptions of Communication Accommodation Theory	480
	Ways to Adapt	483
	Convergence: Merging Thoughts Ahead	483
	Divergence: Vive la Différence	487
	Overaccommodation: Miscommunicating with a Purpose	488

Integration, Critique, and Closing	490
Scope	490
Logical Consistency	491
Heurism	492
Closing	492
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>492</i>

Chapter 29 Muted Group Theory 494

Origins of Muted Group Theory	496
Makeup of Muted Groups	498
Differentiating Between Sex and Gender	499
Assumptions of Muted Group Theory	499
The Process of Silencing	503
Ridicule	504
Ritual	504
Control	505
Harassment	505
Strategies of Resistance	506
Integration, Critique, and Closing	506
Utility	507
Test of Time	508
Closing	508
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>508</i>

Chapter 30 Feminist Standpoint Theory 510

Historical Foundations of Feminist Standpoint Theory	512
The Critique of Theory and Research by Feminist Theorists	513
Assumptions of Feminist Standpoint Theory	514
Feminist Standpoint Theory and the Communication Field	518
Key Concepts of Standpoint Theory	519
Voice	519
Standpoint	519
Situated Knowledges	520
Sexual Division of Labor	521
Integration, Critique, and Closing	521
Utility	522
Closing	524
<i>Discussion Starters</i>	<i>524</i>
Afterward ← ConnectingQuests	527
Glossary	G-1
References	R-1
Name Index	I-1
Subject Index	I-11

Preface

As we present the sixth edition of *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application*, we remain excited by its enormous success. The previous five editions demonstrate that communication theory courses are vibrant, that teachers of communication understand the importance of theoretical thinking, and that both instructors and students appreciate the consistent and organized template we employ throughout. This text explores the practical, engaging, and relevant ways in which theory operates in our lives. *It is written primarily for students who have little or no background in communication theory.* We originally wrote the book because we thought that students need to know how theorizing helps us understand ourselves, as well as our experiences, relationships, media, environment, and culture. We also wrote this book because we believe that students should have a text that relates theory directly to their lives. We felt that some books insulted the student and trivialized theory while other books were written at a level that was far too advanced for an undergraduate. In this book, we take great care to achieve the following additional objectives:

- Familiarize students with the principles and central ideas of important theories they are likely to encounter in the communication discipline.
- Demystify the notion of theory by discussing it in concrete and unequivocal ways.
- Provide students with an understanding of the interplay among theory, communication, and application.
- Introduce students to the research process and the role of theory within this process.
- Assist students in becoming more systematic and thoughtful critical thinkers.

The sixth edition of this book maintains its original focus of introducing communication theory to students in an accessible, appealing, and consistent way. We believe that students understand material best when it is explained in a clear, direct way through a number of realistic and applicable examples. Our hope is that students will take away a basic knowledge of, and appreciation for, communication theory from reading our text.

The theories in communication studies have roots in both communication and in other fields of study. This interdisciplinary orientation is reflected in the selection of the various theories presented in the text. We not only include the unique contributions of communication theorists, but also theories with origins in other fields of study, including psychology, sociology, biology, education, business, and philosophy. Communication theorists have embraced the integration of ideas and principles forged by their colleagues across many disciplines. Yet, the application, influence, and inherent

value of communication are all sustained by the theorists in this text. In other words, although theories cut across various academic disciplines, their relevance to communication remains paramount and we articulate this relevancy in each theory chapter. We do not presume to speak for the theorists; we have distilled their scholarship in a way that we hope represents and honors their hard work. Our overall goal is to frame their words and illustrate their theories with practical examples and instances so that their explication of communication behaviors becomes accessible for students.

Together, we have over 60 years of experience in teaching communication theory. During this time, we have learned a great deal. *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application* utilizes and applies all that we as teachers have learned from our students. We continue to be indebted to both students and colleagues whose suggestions and comments have greatly influenced this newest edition.

The Challenges of Teaching and Learning Communication Theory

The instructor in a communication theory course may face several challenges that are not shared by other courses. First, because many students think of theory as distant, abstract, and obscure, teachers must overcome these potentially negative connotations. Negative feelings toward the subject can be magnified in classrooms where students represent a variety of ages and socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. *Introducing Communication Theory* addresses this challenge by offering a readable and pragmatic guide that integrates content with examples, capturing the essence and elegance of theory in a straightforward manner. In addition, the book takes an incremental approach to learning about theory, resulting in a thoughtful and appropriate learning pace.

A second challenge associated with teaching and learning communication theory relates to preconceived notions of research: Students may view scholarship as difficult or remote. This book demonstrates to students that they already possess many of the characteristics of researchers, such as curiosity and ambition. Students will be pleasantly surprised to know that they operate according to many personal theories every day. Once students begin to revise their misconceptions about research and theory, they are in a position to understand the principles, concepts, and theories contained in this book.

A third challenge of teaching and learning communication theory is capturing the complexity of a theory in an approachable way without oversimplifying the theoretical process. To address this problem, instructors often present a skeletal version of a theory and then fill in the missing pieces with personal materials. By providing a variety of engaging examples and applications reflecting a wide range of classroom demographics, *Introducing Communication Theory* facilitates such an approach.

A final challenge relates to a theory's genesis and today's students. Clearly, in this technological age, students look for and usually crave a desire to find a "tech angle" to communication theory. Although many theories were conceptualized decades ago, in each chapter, we have provided the most recent research that represents a theory–technology framework. Further we have added questions in each chapter that are technological in nature, facilitating further student interest in the material.

Major Changes in Content in the New Edition

The sixth edition has undergone significant modification, namely in the content of the theory chapters and in the various learning aids available. EACH chapter has been updated to reflect the most current thinking. In particular, the following chapters have undergone major changes:

Chapter 2 (Thinking About the Field: Traditions and Contexts) includes the most current scholarship in each of the seven contexts of communication.

Chapter 3 (Thinking About Theory and Research) is completely reorganized to reflect both the quantitative and qualitative thinking influencing theoretical development.

Chapter 4 (Symbolic Interaction Theory) has been completely reorganized so that it disentangles the assumptions and themes of SI.

Chapter 8 (Uncertainty Reduction Theory) has been overhauled and provides a more thoughtful presentation of the various axioms and theorems related to the theory.

Chapter 12 (Communication Privacy Management Theory) has been substantively reorganized. In addition, new information on the criteria used to for developing privacy rules is discussed in detail.

Chapter 14 (Groupthink) includes new information on NASA and the Military Whistleblower Protection Act and their relationship to groupthink.

Chapter 15 (Structuration Theory) provides the newest thinking on various cautionary tales related to social integration.

Chapter 20 (The Narrative Paradigm) delineates new research and practices related to storytelling.

Chapter 21 (Agenda Setting Theory) presents a reorganization and reconceptualization of the three levels of agenda setting.

Chapter 22 (Spiral of Silence Theory) employs the legalization of marijuana as an overarching template while discussing the influence and pervasiveness of public opinion.

Chapter 24 (Cultivation Theory) includes extensive additions throughout on how technology and “mass-mediated storytelling” influence individuals.

Chapter 25 (Cultural Studies) uses both the Flint, Michigan water crisis and marriage equality to demonstrate several of the issues and themes related to the theory.

Chapter 29 (Muted Group Theory) includes a brief history of sexual harassment as computer jargon’s male-centeredness to exemplify several concepts associated with MGT.

Features of the Book

To accomplish our goals and address the challenges of teaching communication theory, we have incorporated a structure that includes number of special features and learning aids into the sixth edition:

- *Part One, Foundations.* The first three chapters of the book continue to provide students a solid foundation for studying the theories that follow. This

“The first three chapters of the book continue to provide students a solid foundation for studying the theories that follow. This groundwork is essential in order to understand how theorists conceptualize and test their theories.”

“Every theory chapter is self-contained and includes a consistent format that begins with a vignette, followed by an introduction, a summary of theoretical assumptions, a description of core concepts, and a critique (using the criteria established in Part One). This consistency provides continuity for students, ensures a balanced presentation of the theories, and helps ease the retrieval of information for future learning experiences.”

groundwork is essential in order to understand how theorists conceptualize and test their theories. Chapters 1 and 2 define communication and provide a framework for examining the theories. We present several traditions and contexts in which theory is customarily categorized and considered. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the intersection of theory and research. This discussion is essential in a theory course and also serves as a springboard for students as they enroll in other courses. In addition, we present students with a template of various evaluative components that we apply in each of the subsequent theory chapters.

- *Part Two, Theories and Theoretical Thinking.* Updated coverage of **all** theories. Separate chapters on each of the theories provide accessible, thorough coverage for students and offer flexibility to instructors. Because of the feedback we received from the previous edition, we retained the original theories from the fifth edition. This updating results in a more thoughtful, current, and applicable presentation of each theory. As noted earlier, in many cases, we have provided the most recent information of the influences of culture and/or technology upon a particular theory, resulting in some very compelling discussions and examples.
- *Section openers.* The theory chapters in Part Two are organized into six sections. We have written section openers to introduce these groups of chapters. The overviews provide students with an explanation for our choices, placing the theories in context and allowing students to have a foundation in order to see the connections between and among theories.
- *Chapter-opening vignettes.* Each chapter begins with an extended vignette, which is then integrated throughout the chapter, providing examples to illustrate the theoretical concepts and claims. We have been pleased that instructors and students point to these vignettes as important applications of sometimes complex material. These stories/case studies help students understand how communication theory plays out in the everyday lives of ordinary people. These opening stories help drive home the important points of the theory. In addition, the real-life tone of each vignette entices students to understand the practicality of a particular theory.
- *A structured approach to each theory.* Every theory chapter is self-contained and includes a consistent format that begins with a story, followed by an introduction, a summary of theoretical assumptions, a description of core concepts, and a critique (using the criteria established in Part One). This consistency provides continuity for students, ensures a balanced presentation of the theories, and helps ease the retrieval of information for future learning experiences. Instructors and students have found this template to be quite valuable since it eliminates the stream-of-consciousness frequently found in other published resources.
- *Student Voices boxes.* These boxes, featured in every chapter, present both new and returning student comments on a particular concept or theoretical issue. The comments, extracted from journals in classes we have taught, illustrate the practicality of the topic under discussion and also show how theoretical issues relate to students' lives. In a sense, this feature illustrates how practical theories are and how much their tenets apply to our everyday lived experiences.

- *Theory in Popular Press.* Students will be introduced to further applications of the various theories and theoretical concepts by examining popular press stories. Stories and articles exemplifying various parts of a theory are provided from a number of different outlets, including *Forbes*, *USA Today*, the (U.K.) *Guardian*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, among many others.
- *Visual template for theory evaluation.* At the conclusion of each theory chapter, a criteria for theory evaluation (presented in Chapter 3) is employed. In addition, the theory's context, scholarly tradition (based on Robert Craig's typology), and approach to knowing are articulated.
- *Theory at a Glance boxes.* In order for students to have an immediate and concise understanding of a particular theory, we incorporate this feature at the beginning of each theory chapter. Students will have these brief explanations and short summaries before reading the chapter, thereby allowing them to have a general sense of what they are about to encounter.
- *Afterword: ConnectingQuests.* This final section of the book provides students with an integration of the various theories in order to see the interrelationships between theories. We believe that theories cut across multiple contexts. To this end, students are asked questions that address the intersection of theories. For instance, to understand "decision making" from two theoretical threads, students are asked to compare the concept and its usage in both Groupthink and Structuration Theory. These questions form a foundation for future conversations about communication theory.
- *Tables, figures, and cartoons.* To increase conceptual organization and enhance the visual presentation of content, we have provided several tables and figures throughout the text. Further, we have provided cartoons to provide another engaging reading option. Many chapters have visual aids for students to consider, helping them to understand the material. These visuals provide a clearer sense of the conceptual organization of the theories, and they support those students who best retain information visually.
- *Running glossary.* Throughout each chapter, a running glossary provides students immediate access to unfamiliar terms and their meanings.
- *End-of-book glossary.* Students have expressed interest in having a compiled list of definitions at the end of the text. This glossary provides easily accessed definitions of all the key terms contained in the book.

In addition to the aforementioned features, several new additions exist in the new edition of *Introducing Communication Theory*:

- **NEW Quantitative and Qualitative Research.** In Chapter 3, we have reorganized the information to make it more understandable for students. We first discuss quantitative research methods and then qualitative research methods. We also added an evaluative statement at the conclusion of each theory chapter which notes whether the theory has primarily been investigated using a framework that is qualitative, quantitative, or both.

- **NEW Theory-Into-Practice (TIP).** We include this feature to provide further application of the information contained in the chapter. We identify a conclusion or two from the theory and then provide a real-world application of the particular claim. This feature sustains our commitment to enhancing the pragmatic value of a theory.
- **NEW Socially Significant Themes and Noteworthy Celebrities.** In an effort to provide students with examples that are compelling and memorable, we make a concerted effort to illustrate points with timely topics and recognizable newsmakers. Themes such as marriage equality, social media, medical marijuana, whistle-blowing, internships, civility, among many others are woven throughout the book. Important global issues, including Black Lives Matter, climate change, the world refugee crisis, among others are woven throughout the text. Cultural figures such as Dr. Oz, Samantha Bee, Maya Angelou, Jimmy Fallon, Dr. Phil, Martha Stewart, and others are also identified at appropriate points along the way. Although we never “dumb down” the theoretical material, we feel it’s important for students to read examples that are somewhat contemporary and not dated.
- **NEW Tech Quest.** Each chapter concludes with several Discussion Starters and a new question that probes how the theory relates to technology. Students will be asked to discuss the interface between a theory and several social media, for instance, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, among others.
- **NEW Cartoons.** Eight new cartoons have been added to the text, providing a humorous break from the theoretical content.
- **NEW Incorporation of over 200 new references.** The explosion in communication research, in particular, is reflected in the incorporation of dozens of new studies, essays, and books that help students understand the theory or theoretical issue. We also provide students with easy access to a citation by integrating an APA format (the acceptable writing style of the communication field) so that they can see the relevancy and currency of a theory. When appropriate, we also have provided URLs for websites that have information which can be readily available.
- **NEW Theoretical Thought.** Each theory chapter begins with a statement made by a theorist or theorists that highlights the essence of the chapter’s content. These quotations reflect further effort to honor the words of the theorist(s).



The 6th edition of *Introducing Communications Theory: Analysis and Application* is now available online with Connect, McGraw-Hill Education’s integrated assignment and assessment platform. Connect also offers SmartBook for the new edition, which is the first adaptive reading experience proven to improve grades and help students

study more effectively. All of the title's website and ancillary content is also available through Connect, including:

- An Instructor's Manual for each chapter with general guidelines for teaching the basic theory course, sample syllabi for quarter and semester courses, chapter outlines, and classroom activities.
- A full Test Bank of multiple choice questions that test students on central concepts and ideas in each chapter.
- Lecture Slides for instructor use in class.

Organization

Part One, Foundations, provides a conceptual base for the discrete theory chapters in Part Two. Chapter 1 begins by introducing the discipline and describing the process of communication. Chapter 2 provides the prevailing traditions and contexts that frame the communication field. In this chapter, we focus on Robert Craig's guide to the ways in which communication theory can be considered. The chapter then turns to primary contexts of communication, which frame the study of communication in most academic settings across the country. Chapter 3 explores the intersection of theory and research. In this chapter, we provide students an understanding of the nature of theory and the characteristics of theory. The research process is also discussed, as are perspectives that guide communication research. Our goal in this chapter is to show that research and theory are interrelated and that the two should be considered in tandem as students read the individual chapters. Chapter 3 also provides a list of evaluative criteria for judging theories as well as for guiding students toward assessment of each subsequent theory chapter.

With Part One establishing a foundation, Part Two, Theories and Theoretical Thinking, introduces students to 27 different theories, each in a discrete, concise chapter. Many of these theories cut across communication contexts. For example, Relational Dialectics Theory can be understood and applied in an organizational context as well as in an interpersonal context. However, to facilitate understanding, we have grouped theories into six sections according to primary focus: The Self and Messages, Relationship Development, Groups, Teams, and Organizations, The Public, The Media, and Culture and Diversity. We undertake this approach to align it with the contexts identified in Chapter 1.

It was challenging for us to decide which theories to include because there are so many from which to choose. In making our selections, we were guided by four broad criteria: (1) whether the theory is significant in the field, (2) whether it reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the field, (3) whether it is important in the context of current thinking in the field, and (4) whether it contributes to a balance of pioneering and contemporary theories in the book. In addition, we were sensitive to the need to include theories developed by a diverse group of scholars. We know that there are many theories that we were unable to include. Yet, our book provides an expansive and respectful array of theories that in the end, we believe provides an important introduction to this challenging and worthwhile area known as communication theory.



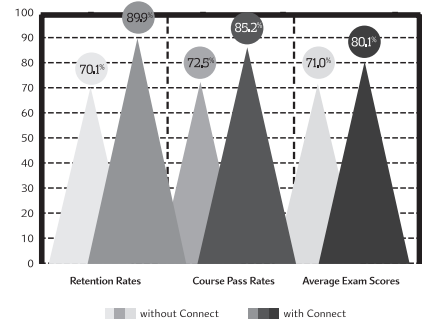
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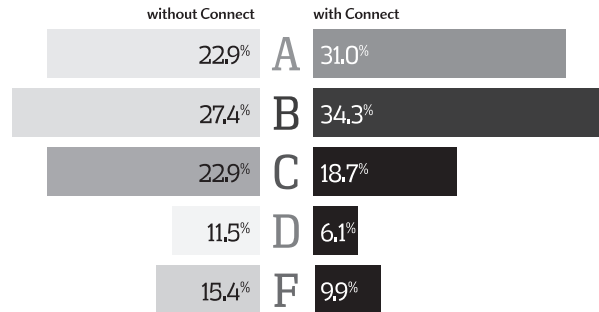
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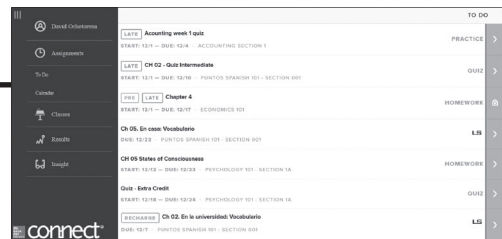
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Rich and Lynn, together, are coauthors of dozens of essays and articles in the communication field. In addition, the two have served as guest coeditors of the *Journal of Family Communication* a few times, focusing on diversity and the family. In addition, they have coauthored several books, including *Gender and Communication*, *Perspectives on Family Communication*, *IPC*, and *Understanding Interpersonal Communication: Making Choices in Changing Times*. The two have coedited the *Family Communication Sourcebook* (Sage, 2006; Winner of the Outstanding Book Award by the

National Communication Association), and *The Handbook of Family Communication*. Further, both are the recipients of the Bernard J. Brommel Award for Outstanding Scholarship and Service in Family Communication. Finally, both recognize the uniqueness and the honor to have served as president of the National Communication Association (Lynn in 2011; Rich in 2012), “the oldest and largest organization in the world promoting communication scholarship and education” (www.natcom.org).

Foundations

Communication, Theory, and Research

Chapter 1
Thinking About
Communication: Definitions,
Models, and Ethics 3

Chapter 2
Thinking About the Field:
Traditions and Contexts 24

Chapter 3
Thinking About Theory
and Research 42

YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT THIS, BUT each day the decisions we make, the (social) media we consume, and the relationships we experience can be enriched and explained by communication theory. Communication theory helps us to understand other people and their communities, the media, and our associations with families, friends, roommates, coworkers, and companions. Perhaps most important, communication theory makes it easier to understand ourselves.

We begin our discussion of communication theory by asking you to consider the experiences of Morgan and Alex. After randomly being assigned as roommates, the two met on “move-in day” at Scott Hall. They were both pretty nervous. They had checked out each other on Facebook, emailed each other, and talked on the phone a few times, so they knew quite a bit about each other. Once they met, they started talking. They went out for coffee the first few weeks of school, getting to know each other better. They spent a lot of time telling stories about their families and friends, and talking about what they look for in a partner. They both loved television, especially the reality shows, because they loved to see how other people dealt with their lives in times of stress. After several weeks, Morgan and Alex became closer. They were going to have to balance their desire to hang out with each other with their need to be alone. And it was going to be give-and-take because their schedules were completely opposite. Eventually, the two became great friends.

To illustrate the various ways in which communication theory functions in the lives of Morgan and Alex, let’s identify important aspects of their story and see how theory provides some understanding of Morgan’s and Alex’s behaviors.

First, these roommates supported the research of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Chapter 8) through their need to reduce their uncertainty about each other. They also probably self-disclosed some personal information to each other, underscoring a central feature of Social Penetration Theory (Chapter 10). Next, they discovered that they both watch television and use it to see how others live their lives, highlighting the essence of Uses and Gratifications Theory (Chapter 23). Balancing their need to be together with the need to remain private encompasses Relational Dialectics Theory (Chapter 11). Morgan and Alex also told personal stories to each other; storytelling is at the heart of the Narrative Paradigm (Chapter 20). In sum, at least five communication theories could help explain the experiences of the two roommates.

The first three chapters provide an important foundation for discussing each communication theory that follows. These chapters give you a general introduction to communication and to theory. First, to provide you some insights into the communication field, in Chapter 1 we present our definition of communication, the prevailing models of communication, and other important issues including ethics and communication. Chapter 2 is dedicated to a discussion of the various traditions and contexts of communication, two important frameworks to consider as you read the remainder of the book. We prepare you directly for understanding the intersection of theory and research in Chapter 3. In this chapter, we also present you the necessary templates to evaluate and understand each theory. The chapter provides important criteria for evaluating a theory and also includes a model for you to examine. We revisit these templates at the conclusion of each theory chapter so that you have a consistent approach from which to interpret the various theories.

Thinking About Communication: Definitions, Models, and Ethics

I suppose all of us get accustomed to look at what we are doing in a certain way and after a while have a kind of “trained incapacity” for looking at things in any other way.

—Marie Hochmuth Nichols

The Bollens

Jimmy and Angie Bollen have been married for almost 30 years, and they are the parents of three children who have been out of the house for years. But, a recent layoff at the company where their son Eddy worked has forced the 24-year-old to return home until he can get another job.

At first, Eddy’s parents were glad that he was home. His father was proud of the fact that his son wasn’t embarrassed about returning home, and his mom was happy to have him help her with some of the mundane chores at home. In fact, Eddy showed both Jimmy and Angie how to instantly message their friends and also put together a family website. His parents were especially happy about having a family member who was “tech-savvy” hanging around the house.

But the good times surrounding Eddy’s return soon ended. Eddy brought his laptop to the table each morning, marring the Bollen’s once-serene breakfasts. Jimmy and Angie’s walks at night were complicated because their son often wanted to join them. At night, when they went to bed, the parents could hear Eddy talking on his cell phone, sometimes until 1:00 A.M. When Eddy’s parents thought about communicating their frustration

and disappointment, they quickly recalled the difficulty of their son’s situation. They didn’t want to upset him any further. The Bollens tried to figure out a way to communicate to their son that although they love him, they wished that he would get a job and leave the house. They simply wanted some peace, privacy, and freedom, and their son was getting in the way. It wasn’t a feeling either one of them liked, but it was their reality.

They considered a number of different approaches. In order to get the conversation going, they even thought about giving Eddy a few website links related to local apartment rentals. Recently, the couple’s frustration with the situation took a turn for the worse. Returning from one of their long walks, they discovered Eddy on the couch, hung over from a party held earlier at his friend’s house. When Jimmy and Angie confronted him about his demeanor, Eddy shouted, “Don’t start lecturing me now. Is it any wonder that none of your other kids call you? It’s because you don’t know when to stop! Look, I got a headache and I don’t want to hear it from you guys!” Jimmy snapped, “Get out of my house. Now!” Eddy left the home, slamming the front door behind him. Angie stared out of the window, wondering whether they would ever hear from their son again.

The value of communication has been lauded by philosophers (“Be silent or say something better than silence”—Pythagoras), writers (“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug”—Mark Twain), performing artists (“Any problem, big or small, in a family usually starts with bad communication”—Emma Thompson), business leaders (“Writing is great for keeping records and putting down details, but talk generates ideas”—T. Boone Pickens), motivational speakers (“The quality of your communication is the quality of your life”—Tony Robbins), and even talk show hosts (“Great communication begins with connection”—Oprah). Perhaps one of the most lasting of all words came from a 1967 film (*Cool Hand Luke*): “What we have here is a failure to communicate”—a quotation that has subsequently been stated in such diverse settings as in the movie *Madagascar*, the song “Civil War” by Guns N’ Roses, and television shows *NCIS* and *Frasier*. It’s clear that nearly all cross sections of a Western society view communication as instrumental in human relationships.

In the most fundamental way, communication depends on our ability to understand one another. Although our communication can be ambiguous (“I never thought I’d get this gift from you”), one primary and essential goal in communicating is understanding. Our daily activities are wrapped in conversations with others. Yet, as we see with the Bollen family, even those in close relationships can have difficulty expressing their thoughts.

Being able to communicate effectively is highly valued in the United States. Corporations have recognized the importance of communication. In 2016, the National Safety Management Society (nsms.us/?s=communication&submit=Search) reports that industrial safety is contingent on the ability of employees and management to communicate clearly and to avoid jargon when possible. Indeed, the entire Safety Professions <http://www.com.edu/gcsi/> “First and foremost, risk managers must be good communicators.” Health care, too, is focusing more on the value of communication. Interestingly, as early as the late 1960s, doctor–patient communication has been a topic of concern in research (Korsch, Gozzi, & Francis, 1968). More recent literature shows that doctor–patient communication is essential for the recovery of patients (Singh, 2016). Finally, in the classroom, researchers (e.g., Bolkon & Goodboy, 2011; Titsworth, Mazer, Goodboy, Bolkan, & Myers, 2015) have concluded that affirming feedback/student confirmation positively affects student learning. And, with respect to social networking sites such as Facebook, individuals in romantic relationships report using communication (technology) as a way to check up on “status updates” on an individual’s wall—from commitment to fidelity (usatodayeducate.com/staging/index.php/campuslife/the-bytes-and-the-bees-love-can-transcend-anything-even-facebook). Make no mistake about it: Abundant evidence underscores the fact that communication is an essential, pervasive, and consequential behavior in our society.

As a student of communication, you are uniquely positioned to determine your potential for effective communication. To do so, however, you must have a basic understanding of the communication process and of how communication theory, in particular, functions in your life. We need to be able to talk effectively, for instance, to a number of very different types of people during an average day: teachers, ministers, salespeople, family members, friends, automobile mechanics, and health care providers.

Communication opportunities fill our lives each day. However, we need to understand the whys and hows of our conversations with others. For instance, why do two people in a relationship feel a simultaneous need for togetherness and independence?

Why do some women feel ignored or devalued in conversations with men? Why does language often influence the thoughts of others? How do media influence people's behavior? To what extent can social media affect the communication among people? These and many other questions are at the root of why communication theory is so important in our society and so critical to understand.

Defining Communication

Our first task is to create a common understanding for the term *communication*. Defining communication can be challenging. Katherine Miller (2005) underscores this dilemma, stating that “conceptualizations of communication have been abundant and have changed substantially over the years” (p. 3). Sarah Trenholm (1991) notes that although the study of communication has been around for centuries, it does not mean communication is well understood. In fact, Trenholm interestingly illustrates the dilemma when defining the term. She states, “Communication has become a sort of ‘portmanteau’ term. Like a piece of luggage, it is overstuffed with all manner of odd ideas and meanings. The fact that some of these do fit, resulting in a conceptual suitcase much too heavy for anyone to carry, is often overlooked” (p. 4).

We should note that there are many ways to interpret and define communication—a result of the complexity and richness of the communication discipline. Imagine, for instance, taking this course from two different professors. Each would have his or her way of presenting the material, and each classroom of students would likely approach communication theory in a unique manner. The result would be two exciting and distinctive approaches to studying the same topic.

This uniqueness holds true with defining communication. Scholars tend to see human phenomena from their own perspectives, something we delve into further in the next chapter. In some ways, researchers establish boundaries when they try to explain phenomena to others. Communication scholars may approach the interpretation of communication differently because of differences in scholarly values. With these caveats in mind, we offer the following definition of *communication* to get us pointed in the same direction.

Communication is a social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment. We necessarily draw in elements of mediated communication as well in our discussion, given the importance that communication technology plays in contemporary society. With that in mind, let's define five key terms in our perspective: *social, process, symbols, meaning, and environment* (Figure 1.1).

First, we believe that communication is a social process. When interpreting communication as **social**, we mean to suggest that it involves people and interactions, whether face-to-face or online. This necessarily includes two people, who act as senders and receivers. Both play an integral role in the communication process. When communication is social, it involves people who come to an interaction with various intentions, motivations, and abilities. To suggest that communication is a **process** means that it is ongoing and unending. Communication is also dynamic, complex, and continually changing. With this view of communication, we emphasize the dynamics of making meaning. Therefore, communication has no definable beginning and ending. For example, although Jimmy and Angie Bollen may tell their son that he must

communication
a social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment

social
the notion that people and interactions are part of the communication process

process
ongoing, dynamic, and unending occurrence

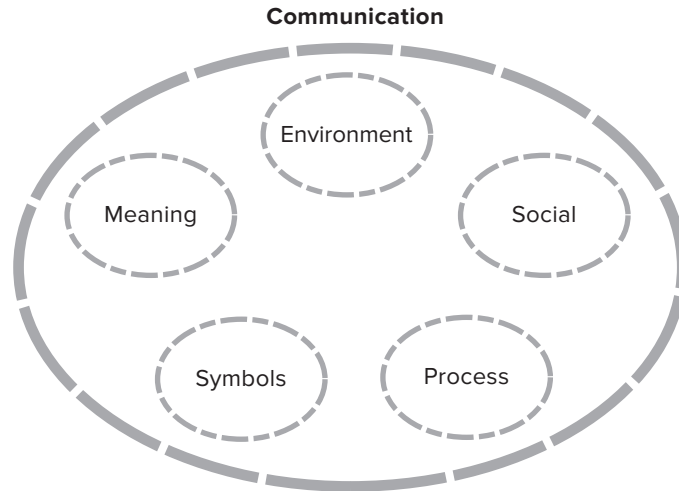


Figure 1.1
Key Terms in
Defining
Communication

leave the house, their discussions with him and about him will continue well after he leaves. In fact, the conversation they have with Eddy today will most likely affect their communication with him tomorrow. Similarly, our past communications with people have been stored in their minds and have affected their conversations with us.

The process nature of communication also means that much can happen from the beginning of a conversation to the end. People may end up at a very different place once a discussion begins. This is exemplified by the frequent conflicts that roommates, spouses, and siblings experience. Although a conversation may begin with absolute and inflexible language, the conflict may be resolved with compromise. All of this can occur in a matter of minutes.

Individual and cultural changes affect communication. Conversations between siblings, for example, have shifted from the 1950s to today. Years ago, siblings rarely discussed the impending death of a parent or the need to take care of an aging parent. Today, it's not uncommon to listen to children talking about nursing home care, home health care, and even funeral arrangements. The 1950s was a time of postwar euphoria; couples were reunited after World War II and the baby boom began. Today, with an ongoing U.S. troop presence around the world, Americans rarely experience the euphoria they once had. The tensions, uncertainties, and loss of life are too compelling for many people. As you can see, perceptions and feelings can change and may remain in flux for quite some time.

Some of you may be thinking that because the communication process is dynamic and unique it is virtually impossible to study. However, C. Arthur VanLear (1996) argues that because the communication process is so dynamic, researchers and theorists can look for patterns over time. He concludes that "if we recognize a pattern across a large number of cases, it permits us to 'generalize' to other unobserved cases" (p. 36). Or, as communication pioneers Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson (1967) suggest, the interconnectedness of communication events is critical and pervasive. Thus, it is possible to study the dynamic communication process.

To help you visualize this process, imagine a continuum where the points are unrepeatable and irreversible. Frank Dance (1967) depicts the communication process by using a spiral or helix (Figure 1.2). He believes that communication experiences are cumulative

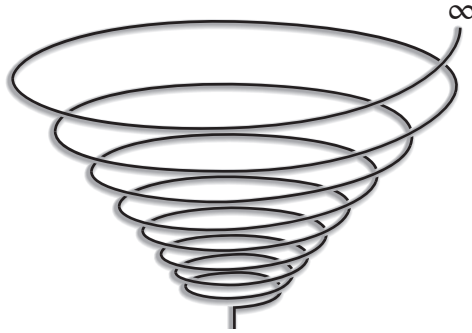


Figure 1.2
Communication
Process as a Helix
Source: Reprinted
by permission of
Frank E. X. Dance.

and are influenced by the past. He notes that present experiences inevitably influence a person’s future, and so he emphasizes a nonlinear view of the process. Communication, therefore, can be considered a process that changes over time and among interactants.

A third term associated with our definition of communication is *symbols*. A **symbol** is an arbitrary label or representation of phenomena. Words are symbols for concepts and things—for example, the word *love* represents the idea of *love*; the word *chair* represents a thing we sit on. Labels may be ambiguous, may be both verbal and nonverbal, and may occur in face-to-face and mediated communication. Symbols are usually agreed on within a group but may not be understood outside of the group. In this way, their use is often arbitrary. For instance, most college students understand the phrase “preregistration is closed”; those outside of college may not understand its meaning. Further, there are both **concrete symbols** (the symbol represents an object) and **abstract symbols** (the symbol stands for a thought or idea).

Even the innocuous Twitter symbol—the hashtag has resonance in politics. Tamara Small (2011), for example, claims that in-depth political reporting and discussion is fast becoming rare in politics. Rather, the search for a condensed, 140-character tweet has supplanted efforts to investigate and interrogate sometimes called “viral politics” (Penney, 2014). So, the hashtag symbol effectively becomes a representation of a story that used to be several hundred words found in newspapers and magazines.

In addition to process and symbols, meaning is central to our definition of communication. **Meaning** is what people extract from a message. In communication episodes, messages can have more than one meaning and even multiple layers of meaning. Without sharing some meanings, we would all have a difficult time speaking the same language or interpreting the same event. Judith Martin and Tom Nakayama (2013) point out that meaning has cultural consequences:

[W]hen President George W. Bush was about to go to war in Iraq, he referred to this war as a “crusade.” The use of this term evoked strong negative reactions in the Islamic world, due to the history of the Crusades nearly 1,000 years ago While President Bush may not have knowingly wanted to frame the Iraq invasion as a religious war against Muslims, the history of the Crusades may make others feel that it is. (p. 70)

Clearly, not all meaning is shared, and people do not always know what others mean. In these situations, we must be able to explain, repeat, and clarify. For example,

symbol
arbitrary label given
to a phenomenon

concrete symbol
symbol represent-
ing an object

abstract symbol
symbol representing
an idea or thought

meaning
what people extract
from a message

if the Bollens want to tell Eddy to move out, they will probably need to go beyond telling him that they just need their “space.” Eddy may perceive “needing space” as simply staying out of the house two nights a week. Furthermore, his parents will have to figure out what communication “approach” is best. They might believe that being direct may be best to get their son out of the house. Or they might fear that such clear communication is not the most effective strategy to change Eddy’s behavior. Regardless of how Jimmy and Angie Bollen communicate their wishes, without sharing the same meaning, the family will have a challenging time getting their messages across to one another.

The final key term in our definition of communication is *environment*. **Environment** is the situation or context in which communication occurs. The environment includes a number of elements, including time, place, historical period, relationship, and a speaker’s and listener’s cultural backgrounds. You can understand the influence of environments by thinking about your beliefs and values pertaining to socially significant topics such as marriage equality, physician-assisted suicide, and immigration into the United States. If you have had personal experience with any of these topics, it’s likely your views are affected by your perceptions.

The environment can also be mediated. By that, we mean that communication takes place with technological assistance. At one point or another, all of us have communicated in a mediated environment, namely through email, chat rooms, or social networking sites. These mediated environments influence the communication between two people in that people in electronic relationships are (usually) not able to observe each other’s eye behavior, listen to vocal characteristics, or watch body movement (Skype would be an exception to this, however). Clearly, the mediated environment has received a great deal of attention over the years as communication theory continues to develop.

environment
*situation or context
in which communication occurs*

Student Voices

Janelle

The discussion in class about environment was interesting to me. I can’t begin to tell you how many different types of physical environments I’m in every day. I work in a nonprofit, so I’m always in and out of the office. Our office is on the third floor of a five-story building. It’s quite small, but we have a lot of fun. Sometimes, though, I have to go to a corporate office where everything is new and looks very expensive. A lot of the workers, though, seem up-tight! Then, I have to visit some people’s homes and I can say that there is so much difference in the way people have arranged their home environments. And I haven’t even begun to talk about how I use email and the different mediated environments. It’s unbelievable!

Models of Understanding: Communication as Action, Interaction, and Transaction

models
simplified representations of the communication process

Communication theorists create **models**, or simplified representations of complex interrelationships among elements in the communication process, which allow us to



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visually understand a sometimes complex process. Models help us weave together the basic elements of the communication process. Although there are many communication models, we discuss the three most prominent ones here. In discussing these models and their underlying approaches, we wish to demonstrate the manner in which communication has been conceptualized over the years.

Communication as Action: The Linear Model

In 1949, Claude Shannon, a Bell Laboratories scientist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Warren Weaver, a consultant on projects at the Sloan Foundation, described communication as a linear process. They were concerned with radio and telephone technology and wanted to develop a model that could explain how information passed through various channels. The result was the conceptualization of the **linear model of communication**.

This approach to human communication comprises several key elements, as Figure 1.3 demonstrates. A **source**, or transmitter of a message, sends a **message** to a **receiver**, the recipient of the message. The receiver is the person who makes sense out of the message. All of this communication takes place in a **channel**, which is the pathway to communication. Channels frequently correspond to the visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory senses. Thus, you use the visual channel when you see your roommate, and you use the tactile channel when you hug your parent.

Communication also involves **noise**, which is anything not intended by the informational source. There are four types of noise. First, **semantic noise** pertains to the slang, jargon, or specialized language used by individuals or groups. For instance,

linear model of communication
one-way view of communication that assumes a message is sent by a source to a receiver through a channel

source
originator of a message

message
words, sounds, actions, or gestures in an interaction

receiver
recipient of a message

channel
pathway to communication

noise
distortion in channel not intended by the source

semantic noise
linguistic influences on reception of message