A First Look at
COMMUNICATION THEORY

Communication
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Tenth Edition

Em Griffin | Andrew Ledbetter | Glenn Sparks

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ANDREW LEDBETTER

GLENN SPARKS

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EM GRIFFIN

Wheaton College

ANDREW LEDBETTER

Texas Christian University

GLENN SPARKS

Purdue University

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Em Griffin is Professor Emeritus of Communication at Wheaton College in Illinois, where he taught for more than 35 years and was chosen Teacher of the Year. In 2016, he was awarded the Wallace A. Bacon Lifetime Teaching Excellence Award from the National Communication Association. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in communication from Northwestern University; his research interest is in the development of close friendships. Em is the author of three applied communication books: *The Mind Changers* (persuasion), *Getting Together* (group dynamics), and *Making Friends* (close relationships). Throughout his life, Em has served as an active volunteer in four nonprofit organizations—Young Life (high school youth), Opportunity International (microfinance services for women in poverty), Chicago Center for Conflict Resolution (mediation), and his church. Em's wife, Jean, is an artist and a musician. They've been married for more than 50 years and have two adult children, Jim and Sharon, and six grandchildren—all deeply involved in baseball or hockey. You can reach Em at em.griffin@wheaton.edu.

Andrew Ledbetter is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Texas Christian University. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in communication studies from the University of Kansas. His research addresses how people use communication technology to maintain family and other interpersonal relationships. Andrew has published more than 50 articles and book chapters, and he has received recognition for teaching excellence from both the National Communication Association and Central States Communication Association. His wife, Jessica, is a former attorney who is pursuing a doctorate in higher education administration at Texas Christian University. With their daughters, Sydney and Kira, they enjoy involvement in their church, playing board and card games, running, reading, cooking, and following the TCU Horned Frogs and Kansas Jayhawks. You can reach Andrew at a.ledbetter@tcu.edu, visit his blog at www.andrewledbetter.com, or follow him on Twitter via @dr_ledbetter.

Glenn Sparks is a professor in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University in Indiana, where he has taught for 32 years and won the highest undergraduate teaching award given by the College of Liberal Arts. He received his Ph.D. in communication arts from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Glenn is the author of *Media Effects Research: A Basic Overview* and a personal memoir, *Rolling in Dough: Lessons I Learned in a Doughnut Shop.* He's co-author of *Refrigerator Rights: Our Crucial Need for Close Connection.* Glenn is an avid sports fan and an aspiring theremin player. He is married to Cheri, who is also a Ph.D. and lecturer in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue. They have three adult children, David, Erin, and Jordan, and four grandchildren, Caleb, Joshua, Autumn, and Benjamin. You can reach Glenn at gsparks@purdue.edu.

DEDICATION

We dedicate this book to our wives, Jeanie, Jessica, and Cheri, who encouraged us to work together, celebrated with us when the process went well, and comforted us when it didn't. Just as they lovingly supported us in this project, we commit to being there for them in what they feel called to do.

Em, Andrew, Glenn

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PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

If you're already familiar with *A First Look at Communication Theory* and understand the approach, organization, and main features of the book, you may want to jump ahead to the "Major Changes in the Tenth Edition" section. For those who are new to the text, reading the entire preface will give you a good grasp of what you and your students can expect.

A Balanced Approach to Theory Selection. We've written *A First Look* for students who have no background in communication theory. It's designed for undergraduates enrolled in an entry-level course, regardless of the students' classification. The trend in the field is to offer students a broad introduction to theory relatively early in their program. But if a department chooses to offer its first theory course on the junior or senior level, the course will still be the students' first comprehensive look at theory, so the book will meet them where they are.

Our goal in this text is to present 32 communication theories in a clear and interesting way. After reading about a given theory, students should understand the theory, know the research that supports it, see useful applications in their lives, and be aware of the theory's possible flaws. We hope readers will discover relationships among theories located across the communication landscape—a clear indication that they grasp what they're reading. But that kind of integrative thinking only takes place when students first comprehend what a theorist claims.

With the help of more than 400 instructors, we've selected a range of theories that reflect the diversity within the discipline. Some theories are proven candidates for a Communication Theory Hall of Fame. For example, Aristotle's analysis of logical, emotional, and ethical appeals continues to set the agenda for many public speaking courses. Mead's symbolic interactionism is formative for interpretive theorists who are dealing with language, thought, meaning, self-concept, or the effect of society upon the individual. Berger's uncertainty reduction theory was the first objective theory to be crafted by a social scientist trained in the field. And no student of mediated communication should be ignorant of Gerbner's cultivation theory, which explains why heavy television viewing cultivates fear of a mean and scary world.

It would be shortsighted, however, to limit the selection to the classics of communication. Some of the discipline's most creative approaches are its newest. For example, Sandra Petronio's theory of communication privacy management undergirds much of the research conducted in the field of health communication. Leslie Baxter's theory of relational dialectics offers insight into the ongoing tensions inherent in

personal relationships. Robert McPhee's communicative constitution of organizations describes how the principle of social construction works in an organizational context. And, like almost all social media theorizing, Caroline Haythornthwaite's media multiplexity theory is still being tested and refined.

Organizational Plan of the Book. Each chapter introduces a single theory in 10 to 15 pages. We've found that most undergraduates think in terms of discrete packets of information, so the concentrated coverage gives them a chance to focus their thoughts while reading a single chapter. This way, students can gain an in-depth understanding of important theories instead of acquiring only a vague familiarity with a jumble of related ideas. The one-chapter–one-theory arrangement also gives teachers the opportunity to skip theories or rearrange the order of presentation without tearing apart the fabric of the text.

The first four chapters provide a framework for understanding the theories to come. The opening chapter, "Launching Your Study of Communication Theory," presents working definitions of both *theory* and *communication*, and also prepares students for the arrangement of the chapters and the features within them. Chapter 2, "Talk About Theory," lays the groundwork for understanding the differences between objective and interpretive theories. Chapter 3, "Weighing the Words," presents two sets of criteria for determining a good objective or interpretive theory. Based on Robert Craig's (University of Colorado) conception, Chapter 4, "Mapping the Territory," introduces seven traditions within the field of communication theory.

Following this integrative framework, we feature 32 theories in 32 self-contained chapters. Each theory is discussed within the context of a communication topic: interpersonal messages, relationship development, relationship maintenance, influence, group communication, organizational communication, public rhetoric, media and culture, media effects, gender and communication, or intercultural communication. These communication context sections usually cover three theories. Each section's two-page introduction outlines a crucial issue that theorists working in this area address. The placement of theories in familiar contexts helps students recognize that theories are answers to questions they've been asking all along. The final chapter, "Common Threads in Comm Theories," offers students a novel form of integration that will help them discern order in the tapestry of communication theory that might otherwise seem chaotic.

Because all theory and practice has value implications, we briefly explore a dozen ethical principles throughout the book. Consistent with the focus of this text, each principle is the central tenet of a specific ethical theory. Other disciplines may ignore these thorny issues, but to discuss communication as a process that is untouched by questions of good and bad, right and wrong, or questions of character would be to disregard an ongoing concern in our field.

Features of Each Chapter. Most people think in pictures. Students will have a rough time understanding a theory unless they apply its explanations and interpretations to concrete situations. Many chapters offer an extended example to illustrate the "truth" a theory proposes. We encourage readers to try out ideas by visualizing a first meeting of freshman roommates, trying to persuade other students to support a zero-tolerance policy on driving after drinking, considering the turbulent marriage of a prophet and a prostitute, and many others. We also use two speeches

of President Barack Obama, and scenes from *Mad Men, The Office, The Help*, and *Thank You for Smoking* to illustrate principles of the theories. The case studies in chapters follow the pedagogical principle of explaining what students don't yet know in terms of ideas and images that are already within their experience.

Some theories are tightly linked with an extensive research project. For example, the impact of cognitive dissonance theory was greatly spurred by Festinger's surprising finding in his now classic $1/$20 experiment. And Orbe's co-cultural theory emerged when he conducted intensive focus groups with members of the LGBTQ community, African American men, and people with physical disabilities. When such exemplars exist, we describe the research in detail so that students can learn from and appreciate the benefits of grounding theory in systematic observation. In this way, readers of *A First Look* are led through a variety of research designs and data analyses.

Students will encounter the names of Baxter, Berger, Bormann, Burgoon, Burke, Deetz, Fisher, Giles, Kramarae, Orbe, Pacanowsky, Pearce, Ting-Toomey, Walther, Wood, and many others in later communication courses. We therefore make a concerted effort to link theory and theorist. By pairing a particular theory with its originator, we try to promote both recall and respect for a given scholar's effort.

The text of each chapter concludes with a section that critiques the theory. This represents a hard look at the ideas presented in light of the criteria for a good theory outlined in Chapter 3. Some theorists have suggested that we are "friends" of their theory. We appreciate that because we want to present all of the theories in a constructive way. But after we summarize a theory's strengths, we then discuss its weaknesses, unanswered questions, and possible errors that remain. We try to stimulate a "That makes sense, and yet I wonder . . ." response among students.

We include a short list of thought questions at the end of each chapter. Labeled "Questions to Sharpen Your Focus," these probes encourage students to make connections among ideas in the chapter and also to apply the theory to their everyday communication experience. As part of this feature, words printed in italics remind students of the key terms of a given theory.

Each chapter ends with a short list of annotated readings entitled "A Second Look." The heading refers to resources for students who are interested in a theory and want to go further than a 10- to 15-page introduction allows. The top item is the resource we recommend as the starting point for further study. The other listings identify places to look for material about each of the major issues raised in the chapter. The format is designed to offer practical encouragement and guidance for further study without overwhelming the novice with multiple citations. The sources of quotations and citations of evidence are listed in an "Endnotes" section at the end of the book.

We think instructors and students alike will get a good chuckle out of the cartoons we've selected for each chapter. The art's main function, however, is to illustrate significant points in the text. As in other editions, we're committed to using quality cartoon art from *The New Yorker* and comic strips such as "Calvin and Hobbes" and "Dilbert." Perceptive cartoonists are modern-day prophets—their humor serves the education process well when it slips through mental barriers or attitudinal defenses that didactic prose can't penetrate.

A co-authored book always faces the challenge of being consistent in style and voice across chapters. This has been less of a problem for us because of our history

together. Andrew Ledbetter and Glenn Sparks continue to be co-authors and equal partners with Em. Both men are highly recognized scholars in their field—Andrew in online communication and family communication, Glenn in media effects and interpersonal communication. Glenn was a student in Em's first persuasion course at Wheaton; Andrew aced one of the last communication theory classes Em taught before he retired from full-time teaching. Despite differences in our ages of more than 40 years, the three of us are close friends and colleagues who have published together before. Each of us vets and edits what the other two write and offers advice on what to cover. We're convinced that this interactive process ensures students will read up-to-date information presented in the same style that has characterized the book throughout the previous nine editions.

While no author considers his or her style ponderous or dull, we believe we've presented the theories in a clear and lively fashion. Accuracy alone does not communicate. We've tried to remain faithful to the vocabulary each theorist uses so that the student can consider the theory in the author's own terms, but we also translate technical language into more familiar words. Students and reviewers cite readability and interest as particular strengths of the text. We encourage you to sample a chapter so you can decide for yourself.

In 13 of the chapters, you'll see photographs of the theorists who appear in "Conversations with Communication Theorists," eight-minute video clips of our discussions together. The text that accompanies each picture previews intriguing comments the theorists made so students can watch the interview with a specific purpose in mind. These videos are available at *www.afirstlook.com*, our authors' website averaging 50,000 log-ins a month. On that site you will also find auto-graded quizzes, chapter outlines, theory abstracts, web links, an archive of theory chapters no longer in the text, and a list of feature film scenes illustrating specific theories. In a password-protected section of the site, instructors can see suggestions for classroom discussion and activities, recommendations for further theory resources, chapter-by-chapter changes from the previous edition, and a chart of theory coverage in other communication theory texts.

Along with many of these resources, an Instructor's Manual, test bank, and lecture slides are available through McGraw-Hill Connect. Connect, McGraw-Hill Education's integrated assignment and assessment platform, also offers SmartBook for the new edition, which is the first adaptive reading experience proven to improve grades and help students study more effectively. Additional information about Connect is available at the end of this preface.

Major Changes in the Tenth Edition. Responding to instructors' desire to offer students more than one social media theory, we're introducing Caroline Haythornthwaite's media multiplexity theory, which explores the mix of media that people use to connect with each other and the strength of their relational bond. We've also added Mark Orbe's co-cultural theory, which is based on extensive phenomenological research among the LGBTQ community, people with physical disabilities, and African American men. The theory plots their patterns of communication with those in the dominant culture based on their desire to stay separate from, seek accommodation from, or assimilate into that culture. To make room for these theories, we've moved our treatment of Watzlawick's interactional view and Philipsen's speech codes theory to the archive at *www.afirstlook.com*, where full chapters can be easily accessed if you desire to assign them to your students.

We've made a concerted effort to update and replace examples that no longer have the explanatory power or appeal they did when introduced in previous editions. We've also worked hard to sharpen the end-of-chapter Critique sections, and in almost all chapters we base our comments on the six criteria for a good interpretive or scientific theory outlined in Chapter 3. Half the chapters in the book have undergone major additions, deletions, or alterations. Here's a sample:

- Our revised critique of **social information processing theory** cites MIT professor Sherry Turkle's challenge to Walther's basic claim that anything we do face-to-face can be done just as well or better online. She claims smartphones are drastically reducing our ability for conversation, intimacy, and empathy.

- **Relational dialectics theory** has now been fully updated to center on Baxter's second version of the theory, which draws heavily on the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin. We have replaced the fictional film *Bend It Like Beckham* with examples drawn from real-life research on family communication.

- **Social judgment theory** is now illustrated with the issue of gun control rather than airline safety.

- The **narrative paradigm** is used as a lens to consider the coherence and fidelity of a story about the turbulent marriage between a prophet and a prostitute.

- **Media ecology** now includes a section on the relationship between Marshall McLuhan's theory and his strong religious faith. It then answers the question of why he didn't speak out against behavioral changes in society that he considered immoral.

- **Dramatism** has been rearranged to foreground Burke's thoughts about language, guilt– redemption, and identification. Building from this background, we then introduce the dramatistic pentad, applying it to comprehend reactions to an Obama campaign speech.

- **Cultural studies** now includes Larry Frey's appeal for communicative activism for social justice. This is the only ethical reflection in the book highlighting an ethicist currently active in the field of communication.

- **Agenda-setting theory** now includes the recently introduced third level, whereby the media tell us how issues connect to each other. The chapter also describes the process of melding agendas into communities.

- **Standpoint theory** now more clearly differentiates between the concepts of *social location* and *standpoint*. The critique section also mentions intersectionality as an extension and challenge to feminist thinking.

- Based on updated research, the presentation of **face-negotiation theory** has been simplified. Em concludes the chapter with a story about how knowledge of the theory helped him mediate a bitter conflict at a mosque.

McGraw-Hill Education also offers a robust custom publishing program, Create, that you may want to consider. Create enables you to build a book with only the chapters you need, and arrange them in the order you'll teach them. There's also the option of adding materials you prepare or using chapters from other McGraw-Hill books or resources from their library. When you build a Create book, you will receive a complimentary print review copy in just a few days or a complimentary eBook via email in about one hour.

Acknowledgments. We gratefully acknowledge the wisdom and counsel of many generous scholars whose intellectual capital is embedded in every page you'll read. Over the last 30 years, more than a thousand communication scholars have gone out of their way to make the book better. People who have made direct contributions to this edition include Ron Adler, Santa Barbara City College; Ryan Bisel, University of Oklahoma; Sarah Bunting, Ayurveda; Judee Burgoon, University of Arizona; Sandy Callaghan, Texas Christian University; Ken Chase, Wheaton College; Jeff Child, Kent State University; Stan Deetz, University of Colorado; Sandy French, Radford University; Darin Garard, Santa Barbara City College; Howard Giles, University of California, Santa Barbara; Caroline Haythornthwaite, Syracuse University; Arthur Jensen, Syracuse University; Gang Luo, Ohio University; Bree McEwan, DePaul University; Marty Medhurst, Baylor University; Julia Moore, University of Utah; Mark Orbe, Western Michigan University; Doug Osman, Purdue University; Kim Pearce, CMM Institute for Personal and Social Evolution; Sandra Petronio, University of Indiana–Purdue University Indianapolis; Russ Proctor, Northern Kentucky University; Doug Pruim, Purdue University; Art Ramirez, University of South Florida; Erin Ruppel, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee; Jordan Soliz, University of Nebraska–Lincoln; Samuel Hardman Taylor, Cornell University; Jessica Vitak, University of Maryland; Deborah Whitt, Wayne State College; Steve Wilson, Purdue University; Paul Witt, Texas Christian University; Julia Wood, University of North Carolina; Robert Woods Jr., Spring Arbor University. Without their help, this edition would be less accurate and certainly less interesting.

Em has great appreciation for Sharon Porteous, a recent Wheaton graduate who served as his research assistant and assembled the comprehensive index that contains thousands of entries—a task no one should do more than once in life.

We are grateful to all the women and men at McGraw-Hill who have been indispensable in making this edition possible: Alex Preiss, Product Developer; Jamie Laferrera, Portfolio Manager; David Patterson, Managing Director; Lori Slattery, Content Licensing Specialist; and Joyce Berendes, Senior Content Licensing Manager. We are greatly appreciate the work of Melissa Sacco, Associate Development Program Director and Sudheer Purushothaman, Project Manager at Lumina Datamatics.

We've been fortunate to work closely with a group of outside contractors who have worked in concert for the last four editions. Jenn Meyer, a commercial computer artist, created and revised figures on 24-hour notice; Judy Brody achieved the impossible by making the extensive and complicated permissions process palatable; Robyn Tellefsen, freelance writer and editor, was Em's student research assistant for the fourth edition of the book, proofreader for three editions, and copy editor for the last two. She also edited a book Glenn wrote. Robyn is quite familiar with communication theory and is someone whose edits we trust implicitly. Thus, the book your students read is better than the one we wrote. Stu Johnson has been the steady webmaster of *www.afirstlook.com* since its inception, creating multiple digital paths for users to find what they want and quickly short-circuiting glitches when they occur. And Amy Keating, for whom Andrew served as graduate advisor at TCU, graciously volunteers to respond to the almost daily requests for passwords to enter the instructors-only section of *www.afirstlook.com*. It's a wonderful team and we're incredibly fortunate to have their skills and friendship.

We offer a special word of appreciation to Emily Langan, who is a central member of our team. Emily is Em's former student who now teaches the courses he taught at Wheaton. This edition is Emily's fifth as author of the ever-evolving Instructor's Manual that is famous among communication theory instructors.

Em recalls the time when he first introduced Emily at a National Communication Association short course on teaching communication theory. The participants stood and applauded. Now she's the lead instructor of that course, where she introduces Em. The three of us are grateful for her wisdom, dedication, creativity, and friendship.

Em Griffin
Andrew Ledbetter
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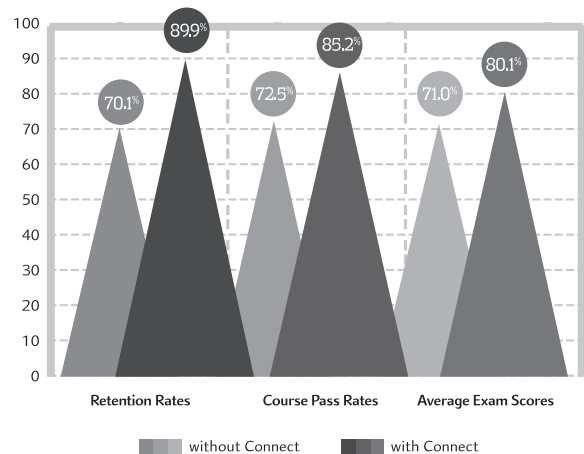
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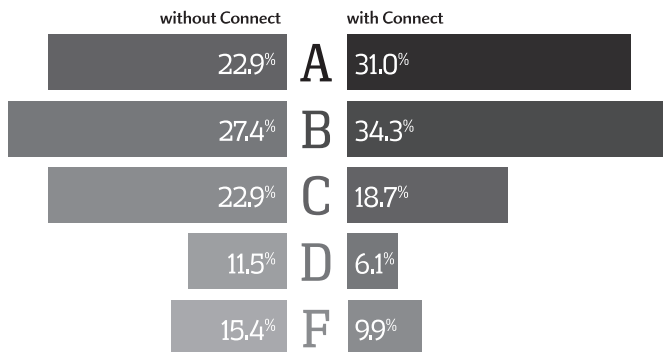
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DIVISION ONE

Overview

Launching Your Study of Communication Theory

This is a book about theories—communication theories. After that statement you may already be stifling a yawn. Many college students, after all, regard theory as obscure, dull, and irrelevant. People outside the classroom are even less charitable. An aircraft mechanic once chided a professor: "You academic types are all alike. Your heads are crammed so full of theory, you wouldn't know which end of a socket wrench to grab. Any plane you touched would crash and burn. All Ph.D. stands for is 'piled higher and deeper.'"

The mechanic could be right. Yet it's ironic that even in the process of knocking theory, he resorts to his own theory of cognitive overload to explain what he sees as the mechanical stupidity of scholars. As authors of this book, we appreciate his desire to make sense of his world. Here's a man who spends a hunk of his life making sure that planes stay safely in the air until pilots are ready to land. When we really care about something, we should seek to answer the *why* and *what if* questions that always emerge. That was the message Em heard from University of Arizona communication theorist Judee Burgoon when he talked with her in our series of interviews, *Conversations with Communication Theorists.*[1] If we care about the fascinating subject of communication, she suggested, we've got to "do theory."

WHAT IS A THEORY AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

In previous editions we used *theory* as "an umbrella term for all careful, systematic, and self-conscious discussion and analysis of communication phenomena," a definition offered by the late University of Minnesota communication professor Ernest Bormann.[2] We like this definition because it's general enough to cover the diverse theories presented in this book. Yet the description is so broad that it doesn't give us any direction on how we might construct a theory, nor does it offer a way to figure out when thoughts or statements about communication haven't attained that status. If we call any idea a "theory," does saying it's so make it so?

In Em's discussion with Judee Burgoon, she suggested that a theory is nothing more than a "set of systematic hunches about the way things operate."[3] Since Burgoon is one of the most frequently cited scholars in the communication discipline, he was intrigued by her unexpected use of the nontechnical term *hunch*. Would it
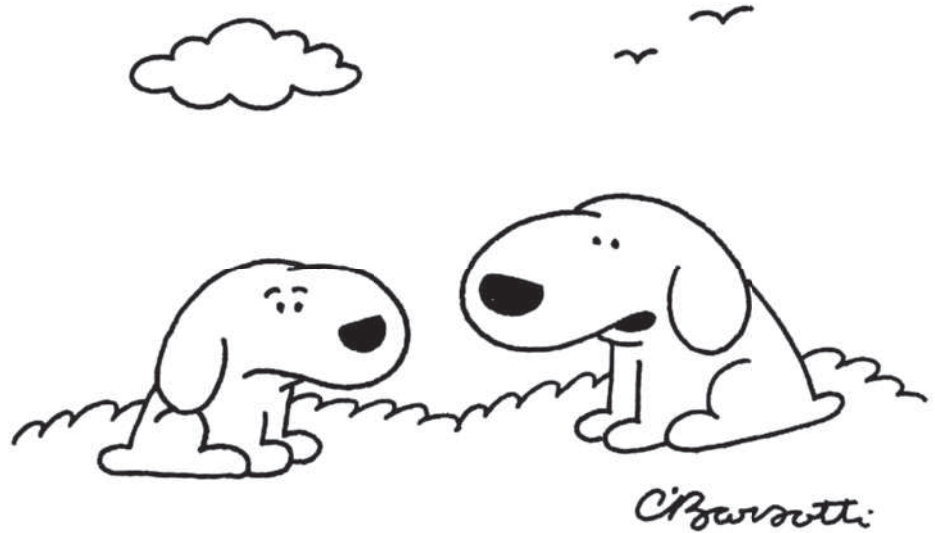
"It's just a theory, but perhaps it's their opposable thumbs that makes them crazy."
©Charles Barsotti/The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank

therefore be legitimate to entitle the book you're reading *Communication Hunches?* She assured Em that it would, quickly adding that they should be "informed hunches." So for Burgoon, a theory consists of *a set of systematic, informed hunches about the way things work.* In the rest of this section, we'll examine the three key features of Burgoon's notion of a theory. First, we'll focus on the idea that theory consists of a *set of hunches.* But a set of hunches is only a starting point. Second, we'll discuss what it means to say that those hunches have to be *informed.* Last, we'll highlight the notion that the hunches have to be *systematic.* Let's look briefly at the meaning of each of these core concepts of theory.

A Set of Hunches

If a theory is a set of hunches, it means we aren't yet sure we have the answer. When there's no puzzle to be solved or the explanation is obvious, there's no need to develop a theory. Theories always involve an element of speculation, or conjecture. Being a theorist is risky business because theories go beyond accepted wisdom. Once you become a theorist, you probably hope that all thinking people will eventually embrace the trial balloon you've launched. When you first float your theory, however, it's definitely in the hunch category.

Theory
A set of systematic, informed hunches about the way things work.

By referring to a plural "set of hunches" rather than a single "hunch," Burgoon makes it clear that a theory is not just one inspired thought or an isolated idea. The dog in the cartoon above may be quite sure that all humans are crazy. But, despite what the pup says, that isolated conviction isn't really a theory. To become one, it would have to go further. For example, good theories define their key terms, so we might ask how the dog defines "crazy." Perhaps the hound would say he thinks his owner is crazy because she shows no interest in eating puppy chow and insists that

her dogs stay off the furniture. That definition may be debatable, but at least it begins to flesh out the dog's initial hunch. A theory will also give some indication of scope. Are some humans crazier than others? Apes and giant pandas have opposable thumbs too. Are they just as crazy? Theory construction involves multiple hunches.

Informed Hunches

For Burgoon, it's not enough to think carefully about an idea; a theorist's hunches should be *informed.* Working on a hunch that opposable thumbs make people crazy, the canine theorist could go check it out. Before developing a theory, there are articles to read, people to talk to, actions to observe, or experiments to run, all of which can cast light on the subject. At the very least, theorists should be familiar with alternative explanations and interpretations of the types of phenomena they are studying. (Little doggie, could it be that animals who bark at passing cars are actually the crazy ones?)

Pepperdine University emeritus communication professor Fred Casmir's description of theory parallels Burgoon's call for multiple informed hunches:

> Theories are sometimes defined as guesses—but significantly as "educated" guesses. Theories are not merely based on vague impressions nor are they accidental by-products of life. Theories tend to result when their creators have prepared themselves to discover something in their environment, which triggers the process of theory construction.[4]

Hunches That Are Systematic

Most scholars reserve the term *theory* for an *integrated system* of concepts. A theory not only lays out multiple ideas, but also specifies the relationships among them. In common parlance, it connects the dots. The links among the informed hunches are clearly drawn so that a pattern emerges.

The dog's hunch definitely doesn't rise to this standard. It's a one-shot claim that isn't part of a conceptual framework. Yes, he suggests there's some connection between opposable thumbs and craziness, but the connecting word *that* in the cartoon doesn't really show the relationship between humans' insane behavior and their anatomy. To do that, the puppy theorist could speculate about the nature of opposable thumbs. They lead humans to eat with their hands rather than with their mouths buried in a dish, and to shake hands when they greet instead of smelling each other. (Everyone knows that smelling is believing.) Humans also use their hands to grasp tools and build machines that sever their connection to the natural world. No other creature on earth does that. If the hound can explain how opposable thumbs lead humans to an artificial view of reality, he's on his way to integrating his thoughts into a coherent whole. As you read about any theory covered in this book, you have a right to expect a set of *systematic,* informed hunches.

Images of Theory

In response to the question *What is a theory?* we've presented a verbal definition. Many students are visual learners as well and would appreciate a concrete image that helps us understand what a theory is and does. So we'll present three metaphors

that we find helpful, but will also note how an overreliance on these representations of theory might lead us astray.

Theories as Nets: Philosopher of science Karl Popper said that "theories are nets cast to catch what we call 'the world'. . . . We endeavor to make the mesh ever finer and finer."[5] This metaphor highlights the ongoing labor of the theorist as a type of deep-sea angler. For serious scholars, theories are the tools of the trade. The term *the world* can be interpreted as everything that goes on under the sun—thus requiring a *grand* theory that applies to all communication, all the time. Conversely, catching the world could be construed as calling for numerous *special* theories—different kinds of small nets to capture distinct types of communication in local situations. But either way, the quest for finer-meshed nets is somewhat disturbing because the study of communication is about people rather than schools of fish. The idea that theories could be woven so tightly that they'd snag everything humans think, say, or do seems naive. The possibility also raises questions about our freedom to choose some actions and reject others.

Theories as Lenses: Many scholars see their theoretical constructions as similar to the lens of a camera or a pair of glasses, as opposed to a mirror that accurately reflects the world out there. The lens imagery highlights the idea that theories shape our perception by focusing attention on some features of communication while ignoring other features, or at least pushing them into the background. Two theorists could analyze the same communication event—an argument, perhaps—and, depending on the lens each uses, one theorist may view the speech act as a breakdown of communication or the breakup of a relationship, while the other theorist will see it as democracy in action. A danger of the lens metaphor is that we might regard what is seen through the glass as so dependent on the theoretical stance of the viewer that we abandon any attempt to discern what is real or true.

Theories as Maps: A good map helps us understand unfamiliar terrain. It's designed with a purpose. Road maps explain how to get from point A to point B. Political maps show boundaries between states and nations. Climate maps reveal whether a place is hot or cold. Within this analogy, a communication theory is a kind of map that's designed to help you navigate some part of the topography of human relationships. In a sense, this book of theories is like a scenic atlas that pulls together 32 must-see locations. However, we must remember that the map is not the territory.[6] Like a still photograph, no theory can fully portray the richness of interaction between people that is constantly changing, always varied, and inevitably more complicated than what any theory can chart. As a person intrigued with communication, aren't you glad it's this way?

WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

So far we've discussed *theory,* but what about *communication*? What is it, exactly? To ask this question is to invite controversy and raise expectations for clarity that can't be met. When it comes to defining what it is we study, there's little discipline in the discipline. Frank Dance, the University of Denver scholar credited with publishing the first comprehensive book on communication theory, cataloged more than 120 definitions of *communication*—and that was 50 years ago.[7] Communication scholars have suggested many more since then, yet no

single definition has risen to the top and become the standard within the field of communication.

At the conclusion of his study, Dance suggested that we're "trying to make the concept of communication do too much work for us."[8] Other communication theorists agree, noting that when the term is used to describe almost every kind of human interaction, it's seriously overburdened. Michigan Tech University communication professor Jennifer Slack brings a splash of reality to attempts to draw definitive lines around what our theories and research cover. She declares that "there is no single, absolute essence of communication that adequately explains the phenomena we study. Such a definition does not exist; neither is it merely awaiting the next brightest communication scholar to nail it down once and for all."[9]

Despite the pitfalls of trying to define *communication* in an all-inclusive way, it seems to us that students who are willing to spend a big chunk of their college education studying communication deserve a description of what it is they're looking at. Rather than giving the final word on what human activities can be legitimately referred to as *communication,* this designation would highlight the essential features of communication that shouldn't be missed. So for starters, we offer this working definition:

> *Communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.*

Communication
The relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.

To the extent that there is redeeming value in this statement, it lies in drawing your attention to five features of communication that you'll run across repeatedly as you read about the theories in the field. We'll flesh out these concepts in the rest of this section.

1. Messages

Messages are at the core of communication study. University of Colorado emeritus communication professor Robert Craig says that communication involves "talking and listening, writing and reading, performing and witnessing, or, more generally, doing anything that involves 'messages' in any medium or situation."[10]

When academic areas such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, literature, and philosophy deal with human symbolic activity, they intersect with the study of communication. The visual image of this intersection of interests has prompted some to refer to communication as a *crossroads discipline.* The difference is that communication scholars are parked at the junction focusing on messages, while other disciplines are just passing through on their way to other destinations. All the theories covered in this book deal specifically with messages.

Text
A record of a message that can be analyzed by others (e.g., a book, film, photograph, or any transcript or recording of a speech or broadcast).

Communication theorists use the word *text* as a synonym for a message that can be studied, regardless of the medium. This book is a text. So is a verbatim transcript of a conversation with your instructor, a recorded presidential news conference, a silent YouTube video, or a Justin Bieber song. To illustrate the following four parts of the definition, suppose you received this cryptic text message from a close friend: "Pat and I spent the night together." You immediately know that the name Pat refers to the person with whom you have an ongoing romantic

relationship. An analysis of this text and the context surrounding its transmission provides a useful case study for examining the essential features of communication.

2. Creation of Messages

This phrase in the working definition of communication indicates that the content and form of a text are usually *constructed, invented, planned, crafted, constituted, selected,* or *adopted* by the communicator. Each of these terms is used in at least one of the theories in this book, and they all imply that the communicator is making a conscious choice of message form and substance. For whatever reason, your friend sent a text message rather than meeting face-to-face, calling you on the phone, sending an email, or writing a note. Your friend also chose the seven words that were transmitted to your cell phone. There is a long history of textual analysis in the field of communication, wherein the rhetorical critic looks for clues in the message to discern the motivation and strategy of the person who created the message.

There are, of course, many times when we speak, write, or gesture in seemingly mindless ways—activities that are like driving on cruise control. These are preprogrammed responses that were selected earlier and stored for later use. In like manner, our repertoire of stock phrases such as *thank you, no problem, whatever,* or a string of swear words were chosen sometime in the past to express our feelings, and over time have become habitual responses. Only when we become more mindful of the nature and impact of our messages will we have the ability to alter them. That's why consciousness-raising is a goal of several theories in this book—each one seeks to increase our communication choices.

3. Interpretation of Messages

Messages do not interpret themselves. The meaning that a message holds for the creators and receivers doesn't reside in the words that are spoken, written, or acted out. Many communication scholars believe that *words don't mean things, people mean things.* Symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer stated the implication of this claim: "Humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people or things."[11]

What is the meaning of your friend's text message? Does "spent the night together" mean *talking until all hours? Pulling an all-night study session? Sleeping on the sofa? Making love?* If it's the latter, how would your friend characterize their sexual liaison? *Recreational sex? A chance hookup? Friends with benefits? Developing a close relationship? Falling in love? The start of a long-term commitment?* Perhaps of more importance to you, how does Pat view it? What emotional meaning is behind the message for each of them? *Satisfaction? Disappointment? Surprise? The morning-after-the-night-before blahs? Gratefulness? Guilt? Ecstasy?* And finally, what does receiving this message through a digital channel mean for you, your friendship, and your relationship with Pat? None of these answers are in the message. Words and other symbols are *polysemic*—they're open to multiple interpretations.

Polysemic
A quality of symbols that means they're open to multiple interpretations.

4. A Relational Process

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus observed that "one cannot step into the same river twice."[12] These words illustrate the widespread acceptance among communication

scholars that communication is a *process.* Much like a river, the flow of communication is always in flux, never completely the same, and can only be described with reference to what went before and what is yet to come. This means that the text message "Pat and I spent the night together" is not the whole story. You'll probably contact both your friend and Pat to ask clarifying questions. As they are answered or avoided, you'll interpret the message in a different way. That's because communication is a process, not a freeze-frame snapshot.

In the opening lines of her essay "Communication as Relationality," University of Georgia rhetorical theorist Celeste Condit suggests that the communication process is more about relationships than it is about content.

> Communication is a process of relating. This means it is not primarily or essentially a process of transferring information or of disseminating or circulating signs (though these things can be identified as happening within the process of relating).[13]

Communication is a relational process not only because it takes place between two or more persons, but also because it affects the nature of the connections among those people. It's obvious that the text message you received will influence the triangle of relationships among you, Pat, and your (former?) friend. But this is true in other forms of mediated communication as well. Television viewers and movie-goers have emotional responses to people they see on-screen. And as businesses are discovering, even the impersonal recorded announcement that "this call may be monitored for quality assurance purposes" has an impact on how we regard their corporate persona.

5. Messages That Elicit a Response

This final component of communication deals with the effect of the message on people who receive it. At the end of his groundbreaking book on communication theory, Dance concludes, "'Communication,' in its broadest interpretation, may be defined as the eliciting of a response."[14] If a message fails to stimulate any cognitive, emotional, or behavioral reaction, it seems pointless to refer to it as *communication.* We often refer to such situations as a message "falling on deaf ears" or the other person "turning a blind eye."

Picture a mother driving her 10-year-old son home from school. He's strapped in the seat behind her playing *Subway Surfers* on his tablet, equipped with earbuds. His mother asks if he has any homework. Is that communication? Not if he doesn't hear the question or see her lips moving. What if he isn't wired for sound and hears her voice? It depends. If he's glued to the screen and totally engrossed in avoiding subway cars, he may literally tune her out—still no communication.

Suppose, however, the boy hears her words and feels *bad* that he has homework, *sad* that his mom's so nosy, *mad* that she broke his game-playing concentration, or *glad* that he finished the assignment during class. Although these are internal feelings that his mother may miss, each response would have been triggered by Mom's question and would therefore qualify as communication—even if he doesn't reply. And of course, any vocal response, even a noncommittal grunt, indicates that some form of communication has occurred.

In like manner, surely you would respond to your friend's cryptic message about the night spent with Pat—even if you give your friend "the silent treatment." In fact, the text seems to have been crafted and sent to provoke a response. How closely

your thoughts, feelings, words, or actions would match what your friend expected or intended is another matter. Successful or not, the whole situation surrounding the text and context of the message fits the working definition of communication that we hope will help you frame your study of communication theory: *Communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.*

AN ARRANGEMENT OF IDEAS TO AID COMPREHENSION

Now that you have a basic understanding of what a communication theory is, knowing how we've structured the book and arranged the theories can help you grasp their content. After this chapter, there are three more chapters in the "Overview" division that will help you compare and contrast theories—think of these chapters as a bird's-eye view of the communication theory terrain. In Chapter 2, co-author Glenn Sparks and another leading communication scholar analyze a highly acclaimed TV ad in order to illustrate how half the theories in the book are based on *objective* assumptions, while the other half are constructed using an *interpretive* set of principles. Chapter 3 presents criteria for judging both kinds of theories so you can make an informed evaluation of a theory's worth rather than relying solely on your gut reaction. Finally, Chapter 4 describes seven traditions of communication theory and research. When you know the family tree of a theory, you can explain why it has a strong affinity with some theories but doesn't speak the same language as others.

Following this overview, there are 32 chapters that run 10–15 pages apiece, each concentrating on a single theory. We think you'll find that the one-chapter, one-theory format is user-friendly because it gives you a chance to focus on a single theory at a time. This way, they won't all blur together in your mind. These chapters are arranged into four major divisions, according to the primary communication context they address. The theories in Division Two, "Interpersonal Communication," consider one-on-one interaction. Division Three, "Group and Public Communication," deals with face-to-face involvement in collective settings. Division Four, "Mass Communication," pulls together theories that explore electronic and print media. Division Five, "Cultural Context," delves into systems of shared meaning that are so all-encompassing we often fail to realize their impact upon us.

These four divisions are based on the fact that theories are tentative answers to questions that occur to people as they mull over practical problems in specific situations. It therefore makes sense to group them according to the different communication settings that usually prompt those questions. This organizational plan is like having four separately indexed file cabinets. Although there is no natural progression from one division to another, the plan provides a convenient way to classify and retrieve the 32 theories.

Finally, Division Six, "Integration," seeks to distill core ideas that are common to a number of theories. Ideas have power, and each theory is driven by one or more ideas that may be shared by other theories from different communication contexts. For example, in each of the four context divisions, there's at least one theory committed to the force of narrative. They each declare that people respond to stories and dramatic imagery with which they can identify. Reading about key concepts that cut across multiple theories wouldn't mean much to you now, but after you become familiar with a number of communication theories, it can be an eye-opening experience that also helps you review what you've learned.