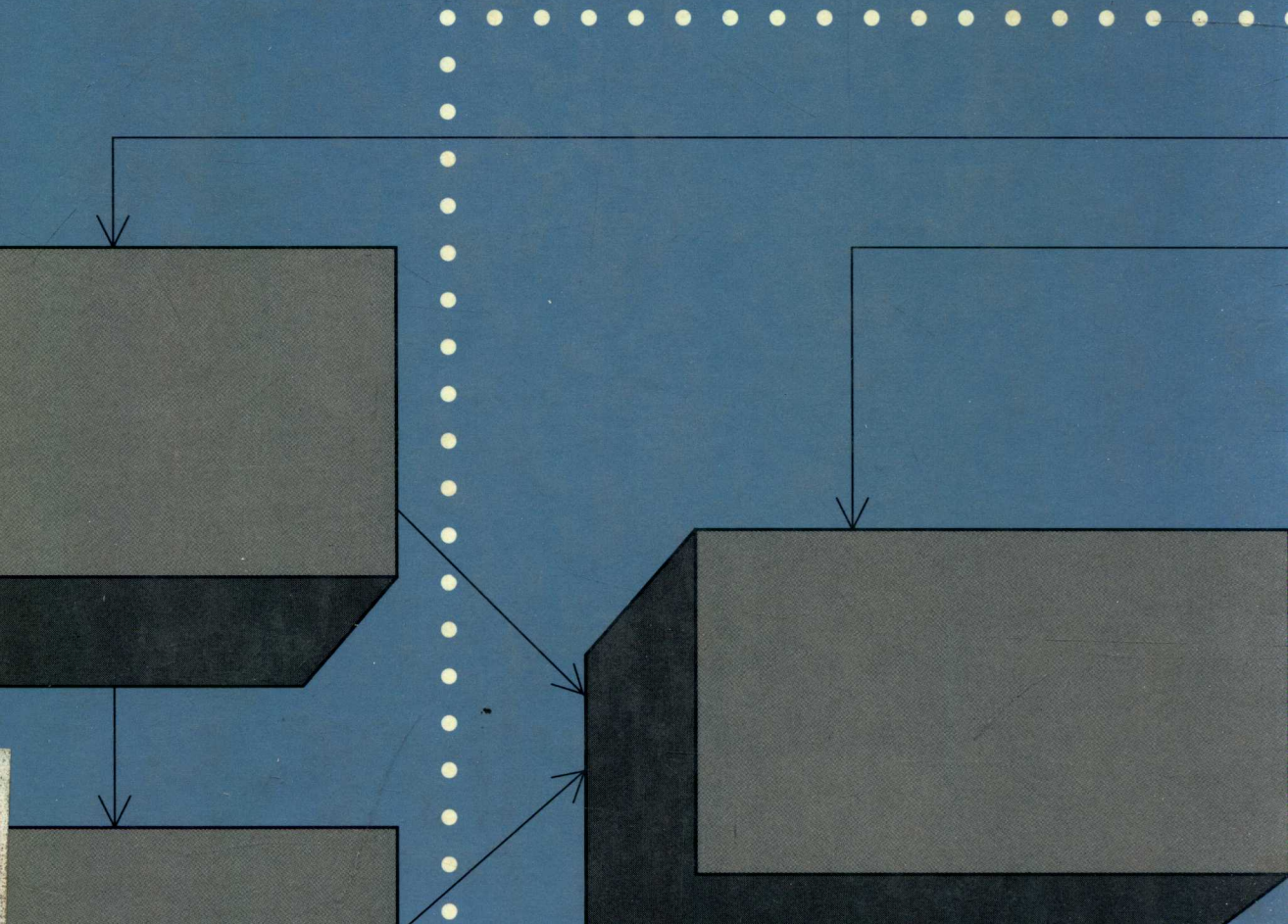


Theories of Human Communication

THIRD EDITION

Stephen W. Littlejohn



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Stephen W. Littlejohn Humboldt State University



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CIP

Dedicated to my friend and colleague

DOUG LOSEE

Dear new ~~new~~ owner of this book;
you are one lucky motherfucker.

The entire book is outlined. You need
only skim through it and you'll get
a "D" with little effort.

If you have a nice ass my
number is 885-4717, ask for John

P.S. No Goddam Queens

Preface

Theories of Human Communication was first published eleven years ago. Those who have followed the text through to this third edition have seen substantial changes from one version to the next. These differences represent changes in the field, my own broadening interest and awareness, and what I hope has been perceived as natural improvements in the writing and content. The past decade has been a period of tremendous development in communication theory, and although no single text can pretend to present the state-of-the-art in communication theory, this third edition provides a good sense of what is happening in this field.

The general nature and level of this book remain the same. It provides a multi-disciplinary survey of many of the theories that have historical and contemporary value to communication scholars. The book remains appropriate as an advanced undergraduate and graduate text with theory-by-theory coverage. It includes a discussion of the nature of theory and inquiry in communication and a summary of general and contextual theories of communication. The introductory material on theory and inquiry has been updated and expanded, and the book as a whole includes many newer theories that were not covered in the previous edition. Sadly, economics forced the elimination of other theories from the text, and difficult judgments had to be made about what to add and delete to keep the book's length about the same.

Part II, which covers general theories of communication, has been completely recast. Instructors who have used previous editions may find some ad-

justment of course organization necessary. The new pattern emphasizes the natural philosophical divisions in the social sciences, and I am confident that it will give students a better sense of the similarities and differences among theories of language, meaning, information, and influence. Although the organization of individual chapters in the section on contexts (Part III) has been changed, the basic order of the contents remains the same. The capstone chapter is new and presents my thoughts on general trends in the field.

I wish to thank first and foremost my three consultants on this project. Stan Deetz of Rutgers University, James Fletcher of the University of Georgia, and Myron Lustig of San Diego State University provided advice and suggestions for improvement throughout the revision process. Although I assume ultimate responsibility for the writing and coverage, these individuals should receive a major part of the credit for the advances made in this edition.

I also wish to thank Janis Wright and Richard Rogers for their essential editorial assistance. Thanks also to Kris Clerkin of Wadsworth for her continued faith in the book and her patience with the revision process. I would also like to thank Michael Oates, production editor, Jennifer Gordon, copy editor, and Al Burkhardt, designer, for their support in the production of this book.

Finally, to Karen Foss, thanks for your loving support.

Stephen Littlejohn

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I

Introduction

CHAPTER ONE

Communication Theory and Scholarship

CHAPTER TWO

Theory in the Process of Inquiry

One

Communication Theory and Scholarship

As long as people have wondered about the world, they have been intrigued by the mysteries of their own nature. The most commonplace activities of our lives—those realms of human nature we take for granted—become puzzles of the largest magnitude when we try to conceptualize them.

Communication is intertwined with all of human life. Any study of human activity must touch on communication processes in one form or another. Some scholars treat communication as central, while others take communication for granted without making it the focus of their study. In this book we are concerned with the idea of communication as central to human life. Our guiding question is how scholars from various traditions have conceptualized, described, and explained human communication.

In a sense this book illustrates a part of our quest to understand ourselves. Specifically, it is a synthesis of many contemporary theories of communication. The book does not provide the answer to questions we ask about communication, but it does present several answers that have been proposed. In other words this book does not complete the puzzle of communication but illustrates how some of the pieces have been shaped and joined.

What Is Communication Theory?

Any attempt to explain or represent a phenomenon is a theory. As discussed in the next chapter, a

theory is someone's conceptualization of an observed set of events. Communication professors often ask their students to devise explanations of certain aspects of communication. This theory-building exercise involves stating clearly what is believed to be happening in communication. Indeed, everybody operates by theory much of the time. Our theories consist of ideas that guide us in making decisions and taking actions. Sometimes our theories are flawed, and we may modify what we think the world is like.

Although the word *theory* can be used to describe the educated guesswork of laypersons, academics use the word somewhat differently. Scholars make it their work to study a particular kind of experience with a keen eye. A theory is the scholar's construction of what an experience is like, based on systematic observation. Thus, theory in this sense is the scholar's best representation of the state of affairs at any given time. As you will see in the next chapter, theory building is not an easy task. A great deal of focused observation, hypothesizing, and revision is required.

The term *communication theory* usually refers to the body of theories or understanding of the communication process. Much disagreement exists about what constitutes an adequate theory of communication. This text presents a wide variety of theories that are discussed in terms of their philosophical assumptions, their claims about what communication involves, and their strengths and weaknesses. You will find a basis for making your own decisions about which theories should and

should not be included in our body of knowledge about communication.

Why Study Communication Theory?

Communication is one of our most pervasive, important, and complex clusters of behavior. The ability to communicate on a higher level separates human beings from other animals. Our daily lives are strongly affected by our own communication with others as well as by messages from distant and unknown persons. If there is a need to know about our world, that need extends to all aspects of human behavior, especially communication.

Specifically, understanding systematic theories of communication enables the individual to become more competent and adaptive. Teachers often provide students with a list of recipes when beginning the study of communication, but the communication process is too complex to be approached entirely on the level of simplistic guidelines. Students also need to learn about sending and receiving messages and relating to others through an understanding of what happens during communication and an ability to adapt to circumstances. The study of communication theory is a way to obtain this understanding.

Everybody tries to make sense out of their own experience. We assign meaning to what is going on in and around us. Sometimes the meaning is shared and sometimes idiosyncratic. Sometimes it is clear and other times vague or contradictory. Often, however, our interpretation of events reflects sensitivity and clear comprehension. When interpretation is difficult or when confusion results, people often make their theories of interpretation conscious. By developing an understanding of the variety of theories to explain communication, students can interpret communication experiences in more flexible, useful, and discriminating ways.

A colleague of mine used to say that the study of communication theory will cause the student to see things he or she has never seen before. N. R. Hanson writes: "The paradigm observer is not the man

who sees and reports what all normal observers see and report, but the man who sees in familiar objects what no one else has seen before."¹ This widening of perception, the unhitching of blinders, helps one transcend habits and become increasingly adaptable and flexible. To borrow some analogies from Thomas S. Kuhn: "Looking at a contour map, the student sees lines on paper, the cartographer a picture of a terrain. Looking at a bubble-chamber photograph, the student sees confused and broken lines, the physicist a record of familiar subnuclear events."² The basic justification for studying theories of communication is that they provide a set of useful conceptual tools.

The Academic Study of Communication

The diversity of communication theory reflects the complexity of communication itself. Looking for the best theory of communication is not particularly useful inasmuch as communication is not a single, unified act but a process consisting of numerous clusters of behavior. Each theory looks at the process from a different angle, and each theory provides insights of its own. Of course, all theories are not equally valid or useful, and any particular investigator may find a specific theory or theories more useful for the work to be undertaken. We should welcome rather than avoid a multitheoretical approach to the complex process of communication.³

An obstacle to a multitheoretical approach is the tendency to view communication from the narrow confines of specific academic disciplines. Because disciplines are somewhat arbitrary, disciplinary divisions do not necessarily provide the best method

1. N. R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 30.

2. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 111.

3. For an excellent case in favor of multiple approaches to communication, see John Waite Bowers and James J. Bradac, "Issues in Communication Theory: A Metatheoretical Analysis," in *Communication Yearbook 5*, ed. Michael Burgoon (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1982), pp. 1-28.