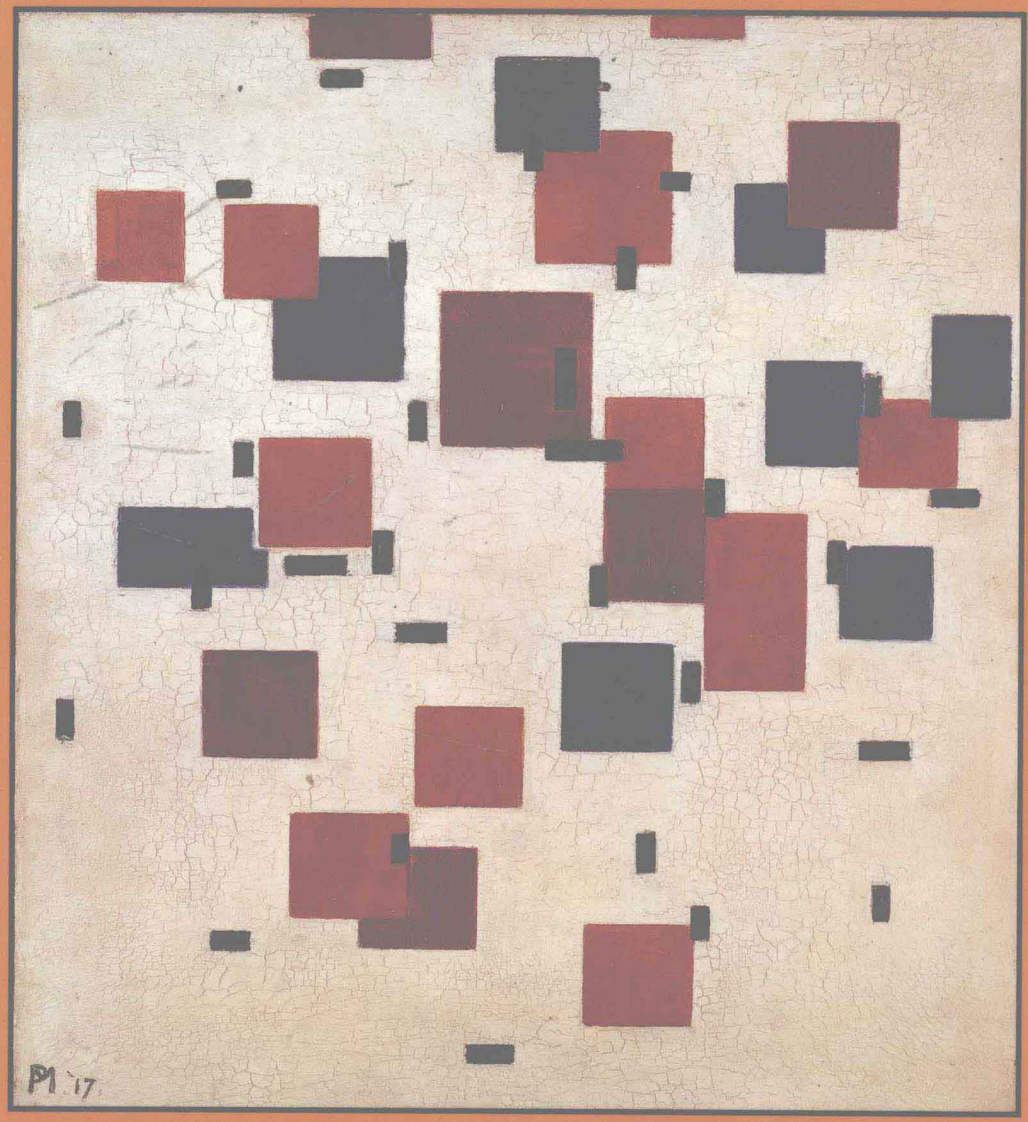
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Approaches and Processes

SECOND EDITION



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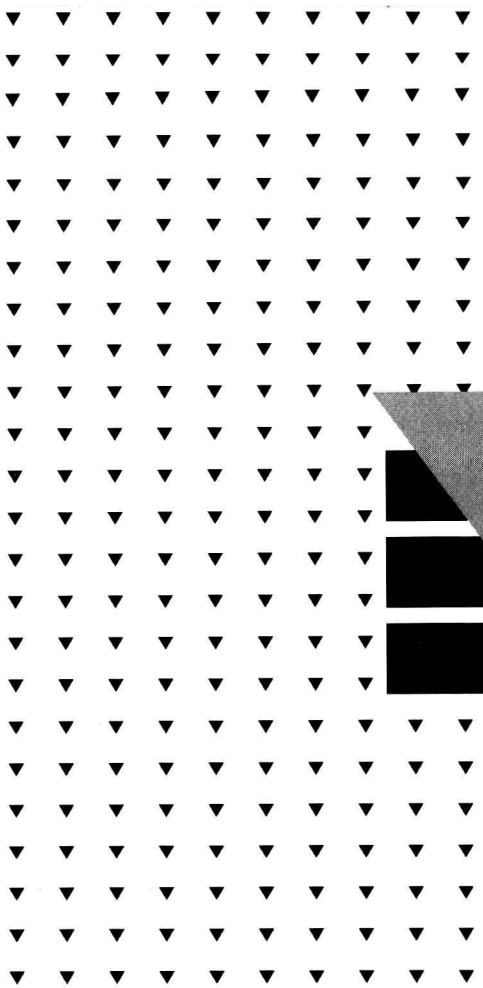

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Katherine Miller

Texas A&M University

Wadsworth Publishing Company

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Cover Design: *Donna Davis*
Cover Image: *Piet Mondrian, Composition in Colour A; oil on canvas (1917). Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, Ottario, Netherlands. © Photograph by Erich Lessing*
Compositor: *Scratchgravel Publishing Services*
Printer: *R. R. Donnelley & Sons*

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Printed in the United States of America

4 5 6 7 8 9 10

For more information, contact Wadsworth Publishing Company, 10 Davis Drive, Belmont, CA 94002, or electronically at http://www.wadsworth.com

International Thomson Publishing Europe
Berkshire House
168-173 High Holborn
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Nelson ITP, Australia
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International Thomson Publishing Southern Africa
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International Thomson Editores
Seneca 53
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11560 México D. F. México

International Thomson Publishing Asia
60 Albert Street
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International Thomson Publishing Japan
Hirakawa-cho Kyowa Building, 3F
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Miller, Katherine, [date]–.
Organizational communication : approaches and processes / Katherine Miller. — 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
ISBN 0-534-52227-0 (alk. paper)
1. Communication in organizations. 2. Communication in personnel management. 3. Interpersonal communication. 4. Communication in organizations—Case studies. I. Title.
HD30.3.M55 1998
659.4'5—dc21 98-16390
CIP

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PREFACE

Although the "ages" of scholarly fields are notoriously hard to pinpoint, most would agree that organizational communication has been around for a half century or more. The infancy of the discipline was marked by struggles for survival and nurturance from other disciplines. The teenage years saw a questioning of identity and fights for autonomy. Today, most would agree that organizational communication has reached a maturity few would have envisioned 30 years ago, and the field now encompasses a healthy eclecticism in that a variety of theoretical approaches provide contrasting accounts of the ways in which communicating and organizing intersect.

This book attempts to reflect the eclectic maturity of the field of organizational communication. When I began writing the first edition of this text, my first conceptual decision was *not* to advocate a particular approach to the field. Instead, in the first edition and in this second edition, I try to show that both traditional and emerging perspectives provide potentially illuminating views of organizational communication processes. For example, a critical theorist, an ethnographer, and a systems researcher may all look at a particular organizational communication phenomenon—say, socialization practices—and see very different things. A systems theorist might see a cybernetic system in which the goal of organizational assimilation is enhanced through a variety of structural and individual communication mechanisms. A cultural researcher might see socialization as a process through which the values and practices of an organizational culture are revealed to—and created by—individuals during organizational entry. A critical theorist might see socialization as a process through which individuals are drawn into hegemonic relationships that reinforce the traditional power structure of the organization. All these views of the organizational socialization process are partial in that each obscures some aspects of organizational entry. But each view is also illuminating. Thus, the first two parts of this text cover a gamut of academic approaches—from classical through human relations and human resources to systems, cultural, and critical—as lenses through which organizational communication can be viewed. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach are considered, but no particular approach is privileged as an inherently superior theoretical approach.

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My second important choice in writing this book was deciding how to organize the burgeoning research literature on organizational communication. To date, most textbooks have taken a "levels" approach, considering, in turn, organizational communication at the individual, dyadic, group, and organizational levels. I have been frustrated by this approach, both because there are some things that happen at multiple levels (for example, we make decisions alone, in dyads, and in groups) and because there are processes that are not easily linked to any of these levels (for example, where does communication technology fit in? at what level do we consider stress and burnout?). Thus, the third and fourth parts of this textbook involve a consideration of organizational communication processes.

My goals in the "processes" portion of the book were threefold. First, I wanted the processes considered to be up to date in reflecting current concerns of both organizational communication scholars and practitioners. Thus, in addition to looking at traditional concerns such as decision making and conflict, this textbook highlights communication processes related to cultural and gender diversity, stress and burnout in the workplace, and new communication technologies. Second, I wanted to be as comprehensive as possible in describing relevant theory and research on each topic. Thus, each "process" chapter highlights both foundational and current research on organizational communication processes from the fields of communication, management, industrial psychology, and sociology. Third, I wanted students to understand that each of these communication processes could be viewed through a variety of theoretical lenses. Thus, each "process" chapter in the second half of the book concludes with a section on the insights of the "approaches" considered in the first half of the book.

Organization of the Text

This textbook, then, explores the world of organizational communication in terms of both scholarship and application. It is divided into four major parts. Parts A and B review approaches to the study of organizational communication, with Part A considering founding approaches that have shaped our beliefs about organizational communication practice (classical, human relations, and human resources approaches) and Part B considering contemporary approaches that influence the way we study organizational communication today (systems, cultural, and critical approaches). Specifically, the three chapters that make up Part A take students on a historical trip through the study of organizational communication. Chapter 1 takes readers back to the early part of the twentieth century

in an exploration of classical and bureaucratic approaches to the understanding of organizational communication processes. The text considers three separate classical approaches and looks at the "machine metaphor" undergirding them. In Chapter 2, the focus moves to the middle part of this century when human relations approaches to organizational study took hold. Chapter 3 examines the human resources approaches that gained prominence in organizational study in the 1960s.

Part B of the text deals with contemporary approaches that influence the way today's scholars approach the understanding and explanation of organizational communication. Chapter 4 introduces students to the systems metaphor for organizational operation by looking at several specific systems theories and at general systems concepts. Chapter 5 examines the culture metaphor, looking at the evolution of this metaphor and its application to the study of organizations. Finally, Chapter 6 considers critical approaches that emphasize organizational power and aspire to emancipate marginalized voices within the organizational context.

Part C of the textbook shifts the focus to a consideration of how these various approaches to the study of organizational communication have been used to understand specific organizational communication processes. The processes considered in Part C are the "enduring" processes that have characterized organizational communication for many years. Chapter 7 looks at socialization, with special consideration of employment interviewing, information seeking, and role development. Chapter 8 investigates the communicative processes involved in controlling the performance of individuals within organizational settings by reviewing research on motivation, compliance gaining, goal setting, and feedback. Chapter 9 discusses the rational and nonrational ways in which communication influences organizational decision making by individuals and groups. Finally, Chapter 10 presents theory and research on the role of communication in organizational conflict.

In the final four chapters of the book, Part D, the focus moves to a consideration of organizational communication processes that have "emerged" in the last few decades as the nature of organizations—and the world in which they operate—has changed. Chapter 11 introduces students to one of the most critical problems facing today's organizations—stress and burnout—by considering the ways in which communication serves as both a cause and a coping mechanism for burnout. Chapter 12 looks at the changing nature of the workplace by considering cultural and gender diversity. Chapter 13 moves the analysis to the interorganizational level by considering relationships among and between organizations and with the customers they serve. Finally, Chapter 14 examines the

impact of our increasing reliance on computer and communication technologies in organizational life.

This second edition of *Organizational Communication: Approaches and Processes* also includes several features designed to enhance students' abilities to integrate and apply the material. Several of these features are maintained from the first edition, including (1) explicit links among the "approach" and "process" chapters, tables, and figures to illustrate key concepts and (2) case studies at the end of each chapter to apply conceptual material to "real-life" organizational communication situations. Like the first edition, this second edition is accompanied by an Instructor's Manual (written by myself, Lori Joseph, Julie Apker, and Collette Clemens) that includes sample syllabi, paper assignments, key terms, chapter outlines, true/false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and essay test items, and suggestions for effective use of the case studies. New to the second edition Instructor's Manual is a consideration of web sites with helpful information for both instructors and students.

This second edition of the textbook also includes many changes that will enhance student understanding of organizational communication. All the chapters have been updated to include current research and theory. In addition, sections were added to many chapters to illustrate current thinking within the field. These sections include considerations of workplace democracy, concertive control theory, feminist approaches to organizational communication, customer service, affirmative action, and the implementation of human resource programs. Also, an important feature was added to each chapter: the Spotlight on Scholarship. In these spotlights, specific research is highlighted that illustrates concepts considered in the chapter. Thus, students can learn more about a particular topic and also get a glimpse of the details of scholarly activity within the field of organizational communication.

Acknowledgements

The writing of this textbook was made much more effective—indeed, even enjoyable—by the efforts of a great many individuals. First, the team at Wadsworth Publishing has been helpful throughout the process of revision. The comments of a number of organizational communication scholars were instrumental in shaping the direction, content, and presentation of this textbook. These include colleagues from around the country who commented on the revision project at various stages: James R. Barker, U.S. Air Force Academy; Janie Harden Fritz, Duquesne University; Mike Hemphill, University of Arkansas, Little Rock; Sandra L. Herndon, Ithaca College; Charlotte M. Jones, Carroll

College; Robert Krizek, St. Louis University; Geoff Leatham, Arizona State University; Vernon Miller, Michigan State University; Tim Sellnow, North Dakota State University; Lynda Dixon Shaver, Bowling Green State University; David Walker, Middle Tennessee State University; and Rita Whillock, Southern Methodist University. I am also extremely appreciative of the teaching assistants who have worked with me in the organizational communication class over the past five years—Caryn Medved, Pam Cherry, Teri Ward, Sheri Shuler, Dave Cook, Jim Patterson, Lori Joseph, Julie Apker, and Collette Clemens.

Finally, my most heartfelt thanks go to my family for providing an environment in which writing this textbook was a pleasurable challenge. Mickey Stanley (crown prince of cocker spaniels) held his neuroses in check and provided fine opportunities for thinking in walks around the neighborhood. Kalena Margaret Miller is a constant joy whose preschool curiosity reminds me that learning is the most fun pursuit of all. Finally, Jim Stiff provided the inspiration to get started, the motivation to follow through, and a wealth of examples of organizational communication in action.

Katherine Miller

CONTENTS

Preface xiii

PART A FOUNDING APPROACHES 1

Chapter 1 CLASSICAL APPROACHES 4

The Machine Metaphor of Organizing 4

Henri Fayol's Theory of Classical Management 6
- Elements of Management 7
- Principles of Management 7
- Summary of Fayol's Theory 10

Max Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy 11

Frederick Taylor's Theory of Scientific Management 13
- Impetus for the Theory of Scientific Management 14
- Components of Scientific Management 14

Communication in Classical Approaches 16
- Content of Communication 17

Spotlight on Scholarship 18

- Direction of Communication Flow 19
- Channel of Communication 19
- Style of Communication 20

Classical Management in Organizations Today 20
- Classical Structure in Today's Organizations 21
- Classical Job Design in Today's Organizations 22

Summary 22

CASE STUDY: *The Creamy Creations Takeover 24*

Chapter 2 HUMAN RELATIONS APPROACHES 26

From Classical Theory to Human Relations: The Hawthorne Studies 27
The Illumination Studies 27
The Relay Assembly Test Room Studies 27
The Interview Program 28
The Bank Wiring Room Studies 28
Explanations of Findings in the Hawthorne Studies 29

Theories of the Human Relations Movement 30
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory 30
Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory 32
McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y 35
Comparison of the Three Theories 37

Communication in Human Relations Approaches 38
Content of Communication 38
Direction of Communication Flow 39
Channel of Communication 39

Spotlight on Scholarship 40

Style of Communication 41

The Human Relations Approach in Organizations Today 42
Impact on Managerial Attitudes 42
Impact on Job Design 42

Summary 43

CASE STUDY: *Motivation at HealthTime Fitness Club 44*

Chapter 3 HUMAN RESOURCES APPROACHES 46

Impetus for the Human Resources Approach 47
Do Human Relations Principles Work? 47
Misuse of Human Relations Principles 49

Founding Theories of the Human Resources Approach 50
Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid 50
Likert's System IV 52
Ouchi's Theory Z 54
Comparison of the Three Theories 55

Communication in Human Resources Organizations 56
Content of Communication 56
Direction of Communication Flow 57
Channel of Communication 57
Style of Communication 58

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Human Resources Organizations Today: Team Management 59
Human Resources Programs 59

Spotlight on Scholarship 60

Enhancing the Effectiveness of Human Resources Programs 62

Summary 64

CASE STUDY: *Teamwork at the Marshall's Processing Plant 65*

PART B CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES 67

Chapter 4 SYSTEMS APPROACHES 69

The Systems Metaphor and Systems Concepts 70
Systems Components 71
Systems Processes 72
System Properties 74

Spotlight on Scholarship 75

Two Systems Theories 76
Cybernetic Systems Theory 78
Karl Weick's Theory of Organizing 80

Methods for Studying Organizational Systems 83
Network Analysis 83
Modeling Techniques 86
Case Analysis 87

Summary 87

CASE STUDY: *Sensemaking After the Acquisition 89*

Chapter 5 CULTURAL APPROACHES 91

Prescriptive Views of Culture 92
Deal and Kennedy's "Strong Cultures" 92
Peters and Waterman's "Excellent Cultures" 93

Descriptive Approaches to Culture 95
Organizational Cultures Are Complicated 95
Organizational Cultures Are Emergent 96
Organizational Cultures Are Not Unitary 97

Spotlight on Scholarship 98

Schein's Model of Organizational Culture 98
A Definition of Culture 99
A Model of Culture 100

Methods for Studying Organizational Culture 106

Summary 108

CASE STUDY: *The Culture Detective 110*

Chapter 6 CRITICAL APPROACHES 112

Critical Approaches 113
The Pervasiveness of Power 114
Ideology and Hegemony 119
Emancipation 120

Two Critical Approaches In Communication 121
A Theory of Concertive Control 121

Spotlight on Scholarship 124

Feminist Theories of Organizational Communication 124

Research Methodology in the Critical Approach 127

Summary 128

CASE STUDY: *Talking Turkey 129*

PART C ENDURING PROCESSES 131

Chapter 7 SOCIALIZATION PROCESSES 133

Models of Organizational Socialization 134
Phases of Socialization 134
Content of Socialization 136

Spotlight on Scholarship 137

Socialization Strategies 138
Summary of Socialization Models 140

Communication Processes during Socialization 140
The Employment Interview 140
Newcomer Information-Seeking Tactics 143
Role-Development Processes 145

Summary 147

CASE STUDY: *Letters to Sigma Chi 151*

Chapter 8 PERFORMANCE CONTROL PROCESSES 153

Controlling Performance in Organizational Settings 154
The "What" of Motivation 154
The "How" of Motivation 156

Communicative Processes of Performance Control 158
Organizational Influence Processes 158
Goal-Setting Processes 161
Feedback Processes 162

Spotlight on Scholarship 163

Summary 168

CASE STUDY: *The Performance Appraisal Meeting 171*

Chapter 9 DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES 173

Models of the Decision-Making Process 173
Rational Models of Decision Making 173
Alternatives to Rational Models 174

Descriptive Research on Organizational Decision Making 176

Small-Group Decision Making 178
Descriptive Models of Small-Group Decision Making 178
Effective Small-Group Decision Making 180

Participation in Decision Making 182
Effects of Participation in Decision Making 183
Models of the Participation Process 183

Spotlight on Scholarship 186

Participative Applications in Organizations and Workplace Democracy 187

Summary 188

CASE STUDY: *Too Many Majors 191*

Chapter 10 CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PROCESSES 194

Conceptualizing the Conflict Process 194
Defining Conflict 194
Levels of Organizational Conflict 196
Phases of Organizational Conflict 196

Managing Organizational Conflict 198
Conflict Styles 198

Bargaining and Negotiation 201
Third-Party Conflict Resolution 203

Factors Influencing the Conflict Management Process 206
Personal Factors 206

Spotlight on Scholarship 207

Relational Factors 208
Group and Organizational Factors 210

Summary 210

CASE STUDY: *The Problem with Teamwork 213*

PART D EMERGING PROCESSES 215

Chapter 11 STRESS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT PROCESSES 217

Basic Terminology and Distinctions 217
Burnout 218
Stressors that Lead to Burnout 219
Individual Predisposition to Burnout 220
Outcomes of Burnout 221

Communication as a Cause of Burnout 222
Emotional Labor and Communication 223
Empathy, Communication, and Burnout 225

Communication and Coping with Burnout 226
Individual and Organizational Coping Strategies 226
Communicative Coping: Participation in Decision Making 227
Communicative Coping: Social Support 228

Spotlight on Scholarship 230

Summary 232

CASE STUDY: *Kid-Care 235*

Chapter 12 DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT PROCESSES 237

Women and Minorities in Today's Organizations 238
Explanation 1: Actual Differences 238
Explanation 2: Systemic Barriers 240
Explanation 3: Discrimination 241
Summary of Women and Minorities in Today's Organizations 242

The Multicultural Organization 242
Description 242

Spotlight on Scholarship 244

The Diverse Organization: Opportunities 245
The Diverse Organization: Challenges 247
Managing Cultural Diversity 251

Summary 253

CASE STUDY: *Diverging Perspectives on Encouraging Cultural Diversity 256*

Chapter 13 EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION PROCESSES 258

The Organizational Environment 259

External Communication Functions 261
Coordinating Interorganizational Relationships 261
Creating and Maintaining Organizational Images 264

Spotlight on Scholarship 265

Providing Customer Service 266
Summary of External Communication Functions 267

Organizational Boundary Spanners 267
Transacting Input Acquisition and Output Disposal 268
Filtering Inputs and Outputs 268
Searching for and Collecting Information 269
Representing the Organization 270
Protecting and Buffering the Organization 271

Summary 271

CASE STUDY: *Service Coordination for the Homeless 274*

Chapter 14 TECHNOLOGICAL PROCESSES 276

Types of Organizational Communication Technology 277

Theories of Communication Media Usage 280
The Media Richness Model 280
The Social Information Processing Model 282
The Dual-Capacity Model 284
Summary of Communication Media Usage 285

Effects of Organizational Communication Technology 286
Effects on Communication Content 286
Effects on Communication Patterns 287

Spotlight on Scholarship 288

Effects on Communication Outcomes 288
Effects on Organizational Structure 289

Summary 290

CASE STUDY: *High-Tech Gardening* 293

REFERENCES 295

AUTHOR INDEX 317

SUBJECT INDEX 321

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