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*heories of  
Human  
Communication*

*FOURTH EDITION*

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*Stephen W. Littlejohn*

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Stephen W. Littlejohn    Humboldt State University

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# Preface

With the publication of the fourth edition, *Theories of Human Communication* is 15 years old. Many changes have occurred in the field during this period, and each revision of the text has attempted to capture the state of communication theory appropriately for its time. No revision of this text has been minor. No revision could have been.

This edition includes many changes and improvements. First and foremost, the book has been lengthened to provide space for more complete coverage of individual theories, more explanation, and better illustration. The text has been updated, with the addition of new material on various theories and the inclusion of some theories that were not mentioned in the previous editions. Sadly, some theories had to be dropped. Numerous brief examples that students can identify from their own experience have been added throughout the text. Students will find this edition more readable than the previous three, and a student workbook is now available to help students with the material.

Another improvement is the addition of research examples for most of the theories. These sections are integrated into the text and range from a paragraph to a page in length. They are not written in a technical style. They serve several functions. First, they give students an idea of how research is done on a particular theory. Second, they illustrate the types of research methods available in the communication field. Third, the research examples help illustrate the ideas of the theory.

Some organizational changes have also taken place. The middle section of the book has been revised to clarify the relationships among theories and to show their historical and conceptual connections. Many of the theories formerly covered in Part III under contexts have been moved to Part II because they help develop concepts introduced there. Part III is now more focused on particular contextual themes—relationships, decision making, networks, and media. These modifications serve to break down artificial divisions that can be misleading in a communication theory course, yet the book still relates to the basic levels of communication on which the field, for better or worse, still depends and which many of our curricula still demand.

New commentary and critique sections have been added to the end of each chapter. These discussions provide perspectives, insights, and criticism of the

theories. Many beginning students may wish to skip these sections, but more experienced students will find that they stimulate thought and further investigation.

Professors who have used this book before will need to make some adjustments in their courses, as they have had to do for each subsequent edition. Course changes, however, will not need to be drastic and will hopefully constitute the refinement and improvement that we all seek in our teaching.

These changes have not superseded the essential qualities of this text that reviewers and adopters have requested over the years. The book remains an extensive overview of theories on a wide variety of communication topics. It will continue to inform advanced students and will appeal to less experienced students as well. Although the book continues to include material from a variety of fields, more theories are taken from the communication field, reflecting a natural change in the discipline itself.

I would like to thank the several reviewers whose suggestions made this edition eminently better: David Brenders, Emerson College; Brant Burleson, Purdue University; William Donaghy, University of Wyoming; Valerie Downs, Cal State University, Northridge; William Eadie, Cal State University, Northridge; Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, University of Wisconsin, Madison; Robert Goyer, Arizona State University; Jerold Hale, Miami University; Martha Haun, University of Houston; Edward Hinck, Central Michigan University; Randy Hirokawa, University of Iowa; Deborah Lieberman, Portland State University; Roxanne Parrott, University of Georgia; Susan Shimanoff, San Francisco State University; and Craig Allen Smith, University of North Carolina, Greenboro; the Wadsworth publication team, including Peggy Randall, Holly Allen, Ruth Cottrell, and Betty Duncan; my colleagues at Humboldt State University whose encouragement always keeps the project alive; and my wife, Karen Foss, for her understanding of what it takes to write a book. I would especially like to thank assistant Roberta Gray for her invaluable help throughout the project. I would also like to thank the many students and faculty from around the world who have found this book useful and interesting. One of life's greatest gratifications is to be told that one's work has been beneficial to others.

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P A R T



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# The Nature of Inquiry and Theory

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- 1** Communication Theory and Scholarship
- 2** Theory in the Process of Inquiry

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# Communication Theory and Scholarship

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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 understand 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, whereas 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.

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## What Is Communication Theory?

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Any attempt to explain or represent something 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 for understanding the communication process. Much disagreement exists about what constitutes an adequate theory of communication. This text presents a wide variety of theories, which 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.

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## Why Study Communication Theory?

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Communication is one of our most pervasive, important, and complex clusters of behavior. The ability to communicate on a higher level separates humans 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, theories of communication help you 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 gain 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 it is not. Sometimes it is clear and other times vague or contradictory. 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 never saw 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."<sup>1</sup> This widening of perception, the unhitching of blinders, helps one transcend habits and become increasingly adaptable and flexible. To borrow some analogies from Thomas 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."<sup>2</sup> The basic justification for studying theories of communication is that they provide a set of useful conceptual tools.

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## The Academic Study of Communication

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Although communication has been studied since antiquity,<sup>3</sup> it has become a major topic of concern in the twentieth century. One author has referred to this development as a "revolutionary discovery," largely caused by the rise of communication technologies such as radio, television, telephone, satellites, and computer networking, along with the Industrial Revolution, big business, and

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

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

3. See, for example, W. Barnett Pearce and Karen A. Foss, "The Historical Context of Communication as a Science," in *Human Communication: Theory and Research*, eds. G. L. Dahnke and G. W. Clatterbuck (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1990), pp. 1-20; Nancy Harper, *Human Communication Theory: The History of a Paradigm* (Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1979).

global politics.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, communication has assumed immense importance in our time. It is therefore not surprising that communication should interest teachers, researchers, and theorists.

Intense interest in the academic study of communication began after World War I, as increasing technology and literacy made communication a topic of concern.<sup>5</sup> This concern was stimulated in large measure by the popular ideologies of progressivism and pragmatism, which provoked a desire to advance society and create social change.

A variety of interests supported this early work. One important area of research was the political influence of public messages, which led to considerable research on propaganda and public opinion. This period saw the beginnings of attitude and opinion measurement as researchers attempted to discover the extent to which public opinion was directed by public communication.

At the same time, the social sciences were developing, and both sociology and social psychology emerged. Sociology studied social life, and although their methods differed somewhat, sociology and psychology became preoccupied with research methods. There was considerable experimentation with method, the development of standards for evaluating research, and methodological debates, many of which continue today. Much of the research in sociology in the 1930s investigated the ways in which interaction affects individuals and communities, and popular research topics in social psychology included effects of movies on children, propaganda and persuasion, and group dynamics.

Another research tradition in the early years dealt with communication and education with special attention to the use of new technologies such as radio in education, the teaching of basic communication skills such as public speaking and group discussion, and the effects of various communication practices in the classroom.

4. W. Barnett Pearce, *Communication and the Human Condition* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989).

5. This brief history is based on Jesse G. Delia, "Communication Research: A History," in *Handbook of Communication Science*, eds. C. R. Berger and S. H. Chaffee (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987), pp. 20-98.

The first half of this century was also dominated by commercial interests such as advertising. Much of the early research, even in universities, was driven by the desire of market enterprises to know more about communication.

After World War II, the social sciences became fully recognized as legitimate disciplines, as the interest in psychosocial processes became intense. Persuasion and decisionmaking in groups were central concerns, not only among researchers but also in society at large. After World War II then, the topic of communication was recognized as a legitimate and important study. The approach to communication, however, took rather different turns in Europe and the United States.

In the United States, communication researchers pursued the idea that communication should be studied objectively, primarily with quantitative methods. Although complete consensus was never achieved on this ideal, it was the standard for many years. European investigations, on the other hand, were influenced by historical, cultural, and critical interests and were largely influenced by Marxism. Over the years, tension has been growing between these two traditions, although considerable influence has flowed both ways as scientific work has gotten a toehold in Europe and critical perspectives are taken seriously in North America. Indeed, after about 1960 both the scientific and critical perspectives themselves lost much of their coherence as internal debates and were promulgated within each tradition.

The study of communication as we have understood it in the United States and in Europe is a Western, Eurocentric endeavor. Indeed, virtually all theories discussed in this book are in the Western tradition. This does not mean, however, that thinking common to other parts of the world does not have insights into communication. In a valuable and interesting treatment, Lawrence Kincaid contrasts a variety of Western and Eastern perspectives on communication theory.<sup>6</sup>

Kincaid notes a number of differences between Asian and Western perspectives.<sup>7</sup> For one, Eastern

6. D. Lawrence Kincaid, *Communication Theory: Eastern and Western Perspectives* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1987).

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 331-353.