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Introduction

Contents

Learning Aims	1
Theory and Practice	2
A Multiple Perspective Approach	4
A Contingency Approach	5
A Changing Field	6
Plan of the Book	6
Exercise	6
Further Reading	7
Key Terms	7

Communication planning is a broad and multi-faceted concept; it is used every day by thousands and thousands of people – by public relations practitioners, technical writers, information campaigners, advertising professionals, organization consultants, educators, health communicators, and many, many others. The term ‘communication planning’ is probably less common than the activity it describes. That may have to do with a hesitancy to connect the notion of **communication**, which is thought of as being spontaneous in nature, with the idea of planning, which is usually associated with such concepts as ‘management,’ ‘control,’ and ‘strategy.’ In this book we shall argue that in order to achieve good results (for good causes), the two – communication and planning – must go hand in hand.

Learning Aims

This chapter is designed to help you understand:

- the range of communication theories and how they may be categorized;
- what is distinctive about the approach used in this book.

Theory and Practice

All communication planners use theories to guide their work. Often these are their own theories, based on their own experiences and on common practice. Many are unaware that formal research, both academic and non-academic, has generated a continuously growing body of theories applicable to planned communication. To some extent, these theories have gained their impetus from practical communication work.

There are several kinds of theory. McQuail's (2005) typology clarifies what we, for our part, mean by theory; he distinguishes five main categories: **social scientific, cultural, normative, operational, and commonsense.**

Social scientific theory, which may be regarded as the most sophisticated type of theory for communication planning, is derived from work done according to scientific rules and methods. Most development of social scientific theories occurs in the context of a scientific community; these theories are characterized by their reliance on abstract concepts.

Cultural theory is more diverse than social scientific theory. It has developed from disciplines such as aesthetics, ethics, and social criticism. It has been applied to a variety of cultural artefacts, such as films, television programmes, and novels. Sometimes cultural theory is concerned with differentiating between such artefacts on grounds of quality. At other times, it has virtually the opposite concern, i.e. to challenge society's hierarchical classifications of cultural artefacts. Cultural theories tend to be based more on imagination and less on observation than are social scientific theories, though often researchers combine the two approaches.

Normative theory tells us, based on values and ideological positions, how communication should be formed and function in certain cases. Normative theories for information and communication in, say, Great Britain, the Ivory Coast, and the People's Republic of China differ greatly; the working environments for communication planners in each country will, thus, be very different as well. Normative theories appear at other levels as well. A planner working in an organization may find that the organization views communication in certain normative ways, for example, communication should be conceived so as to enhance participation.

Operational theory is both practical and normative. It instructs the practitioner on how to do communication planning to achieve a particular communication goal, according to communication theory often formalized by the practitioners themselves. For example, theory about communication networks in organizations, which may have its roots in observations of everyday work patterns, may help the communication planner use informal channels of communication more efficiently. In the same vein, an audience segmentation theory about lifestyles that originates in social science research can alert

planners to consider certain traits of their readers, listeners, or viewers in creating messages.

Commonsense theory originates in our own experiences and guides us through everyday life, including the professional part of it. Communication planners cannot, even if they are committed to relying on scientific theory, escape from using this type of non-formalized theory. A problem for communication planners is that often their work is criticized by people using their commonsense theories and believing them to be as scientific or well-grounded working theories. The professional communication planner, who may find this extremely frustrating, must recognize that the very nature of the knowledge base in communications does not command the same respect from the lay person as occurs in, for example, engineering. (We all consider ourselves communicators; few of us would pass ourselves off as builders of bridges.) On the other hand, the pay-off for this reliance on commonsense theories by the lay public at the expense of more rigorous scientific theory is a broadening of discussion and participation in the field. In many cases, this has led to testing that has validated a commonsense theory and added it to the body of social scientific theories.

As can be seen, these levels of theory are highly interconnected. Social scientific theory has been enriched by cross-overs from commonsense theory. On the other hand, the existence of a normative information theory in a given country, community, or organization may constrain the use of certain working theories or make impossible the testing and acceptance of a social scientific theory that runs counter to accepted theoretical precepts.

In this book, we shall dwell in the realm of social scientific and working theories. It is an explicit aim of the book to bring theory and practice together. Too often, theories and the applications they suggest are presented without such ambitions, leaving it unclear to the reader just what the links between the two are. We want strongly to emphasize that, used in the right way, theories have great practical value. The old saying, 'There is nothing as practical as a good theory,' could be used as the theme for this discussion.

The idea is to connect in a very literal sense the various communication theories with the concrete situation of communication work. In many cases, the presentation of theories or elements of theories will be followed by a discussion, outlining the way that a particular theory can be used by planners in their work. Thus, practitioners will be informed about theories in a way designed to relate directly to their work situations and experiences. The student of communication likewise should gain insights into the practical nature of different theories and how to use them in communication planning.

A word of caution is in order here. This is not a book of checklists and not a how-to book. Because every communication situation is different, it would make little sense to present you with narrow, technical advice. Rather, you

should gain an understanding of the different types of situations you will encounter as a communication planner that will require hard-nosed analysis and decision-making.

Reflection (1.1)

Commonsense theories of communication often contain beliefs that are expressed in idioms, clichés, proverbs, and adages. Examples include:

- (a) 'It's good to talk.'
- (b) 'Flattery will get you nowhere.'
- (c) 'A gentleman's word is his bond.'
- (d) 'A picture is worth a thousand words.'

Ask yourself:

- 1 What other examples can you think of?
- 2 Which commonsense beliefs about communication do you share?

A Multiple Perspective Approach

This book strives to present an array of diverse perspectives and approaches, first, to demonstrate the richness of the field, and, second, to show that there always are several options for the communication planner. For communication planners to cling to one single solution to communication problems, regardless of the different characteristics of different problems, ranks, in our opinion, up there in the category of mortal sin.

We do not, however, intend to present a complete and comprehensive picture of all the theories that comprise the field of communication; this would be far beyond the scope of this book. Also, we are not particularly interested, for the purposes of this book, in purely scholarly disputes over details. When elaborating different approaches or even philosophies, our aim is to alert you, the reader, to the many junctures in the communication process where choices both can and must be made and to how theories can guide those choices.

In our attempts to be useful to the practitioner we, by and large, remain within the many mainstream approaches that have been discussed for some years in communication science. This is another way of saying that preference will be given to the presentation of the theories over their critiques. Our purpose is not to contribute to theory development by juxtaposing different viewpoints. Throughout the book, however, you will find references to authors and articles that deal in more depth with the topic we are discussing, introduce you to other theoretical approaches, or present critical commentaries on

other scholars' approaches. We encourage you to explore these supplementary materials.

A multiple perspective also emerges through a multi-cultural approach. While largely writing against an Anglo-Saxon background, we have deliberately attempted to discuss other research traditions as well, namely Scandinavian and German. Although some of those researchers are strongly entrenched in Anglo-American thinking, it is nevertheless telling to observe differing priorities and viewpoints (see, for example, Rogers and Balle 1985).

A Contingency Approach

Our approach is one of contingency (see, for example, Goldhaber 1986), which means that we consider each communication problem to be essentially unique and existing under certain conditions; solutions to the problems may be found in very different theories or combinations of theories. We consider the contingency approach to be normative – an approach that prevents communication planning from becoming an assembly line routine. Viewing the planning process in this way has definite advantages and is the only way to arrive at optimal decisions which will lead to the most effective goal-fulfillment. We will find that information and communication do not by themselves ensure achievement of one's aims; rather, in striving for even modest goals, careful planning, based on analysis and specification of the conditions of the situation, is paramount.

New developments in organization theory have influenced our adherence to this contingency 'philosophy.' The notion that there is no 'one best way to organize' has emerged as a reaction to the one-sidedness – real or perceived – of such schools of thought as scientific management and human relations. Based on empirical studies by the British researcher Woodward, among others, the contingency theory argues that organizations are 'not independent entities but interdependent systems. Because of this, they must constantly adapt to the changes going on around them' (Duncan 1978). Culturally and philosophically, the contingency view is grounded in the theory that modern society operates with multiple value systems as opposed to the universal and authoritarian values that characterized earlier periods. For the communication planner, the implication of this line of thought must be that there is no 'one best way' to communicate.

The reader will note that there are certain fields of communication work in which we are particularly interested, non-commercial areas such as health communication among them. That does not mean that communication planners in the commercial sphere, for example, in public relations, cannot make use of this book. On the contrary, they will find much of the information applicable to their work as well.

A Changing Field

Theory-building within our field changes and develops continuously. We have attempted to reflect these developments by presenting material that is as up-to-date as possible. For example, strategies of planned communication have become less rigid, less one-way, and less sender-oriented; we shall review these changes, but not at the expense of more traditional approaches, which we think are still rich in applicable material. For example, James Carey's (1975) distinction between the traditional transmission/mechanistic and the ritual/symbolic communication approaches is of great importance for understanding this shift in theory and practice. We will explore this distinction and its impact on communication planning in the next chapter.

Plan of the Book

The book is organized into three parts. Part I introduces communication planning in terms of a presentation of basic concepts and strategies as well as outlining the role of the communication planner. Part II elaborates some of the theoretical approaches from which a planner may choose. In Part III, we present a number of mass communication theories and elements of theories to be used in designing strategies in communication planning.

■ ■ Exercise ■

On the Internet, use the search term 'communication theory' to locate examples of theories in this field. Categorize each theory that you read about using McQuail's fivefold typology:

- 1 social scientific theory;
- 2 cultural theory;
- 3 normative theory;
- 4 operational theory;
- 5 commonsense theory.

As an alternative to using the Internet, you may choose to look at samples from collected readings such as Cobley (1996).

■ ■ Further Reading ■

This chapter says little about the history of communication theory. For a more historical treatment, see Mattelart and Mattelart (1998), Rogers (1994), (for coverage of a longer timespan) Peters (1999), and (for views from Germany) Meyen and Löblich (2006).

For a wide-ranging theoretical discussion of the place of communication studies in relation to other disciplines, see, for example, Chapter 1 ('Communication: Elusive Phenomenon, Emergent Discipline') in Rosengren (2000) or Pias et al. (2002).

For examples of readings representing a number of traditions, especially cultural and social scientific theory, see Part II ('Conceptual Issues and Varieties of Approach') in McQuail (2002). Part IV of the same book provides a selection of readings drawn from normative theory.

Key Terms

Commonsense theory
Contingency approach
Cultural theory

Normative theory
Operational theory
Social scientific theory

