Reflection on “Communication Theory as a Field”

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The appearance of a new French translation of “Communication Theory as a Field” (hereafter CTF) in the inaugural issue of Revue internationale de communication sociale et publique is a distinct honor, for which I thank the translators and editors. Their invitation to write this brief introduction is also a welcome opportunity to reflect on the article’s current significance a decade after its first English publication (Craig, 1999).

CTF has been cited widely in the scholarly literature and has contributed to the pedagogy of communication theory through its use in textbooks to provide an overview of the field, but its influence in the primary scholarship of communication theory so far has been rather diffuse. It is cited most frequently by way of a gesture toward the field as a whole or to one or more of the famous “seven traditions.” Still more diffusely, the vocabulary of theoretical traditions seems to have seeped a little into the language of communication theory, so writers now are a little more likely to mention a “phenomenological tradition” in contexts where they might have used “phenomenology.” CTF may have thus contributed to the gradual formation of a certain broad consciousness of communication theory as a field. However, the specific metatheoretical standpoint defended in CTF, its interpretation of the main theoretical traditions, and its proposed agenda for research and debate in communication theory have received relatively little uptake or critical response (see Martinez, 2008; Myers, 2001; Russill, 2005). The effort to “jump start” a conversation in the field seems to have sparked no more than a few sputters. Communication theory remains in a state of “productive fragmentation” without much apparent movement toward the problem-centered “dialogical-dialectical coherence” idealistically envisioned by CTF.

It is admittedly an idealistic vision, and philosophical or practical reasons to ignore it are easily found. The “constitutive metamodel” reduces philosophically incompatible traditions of thought to a series of relativized perspectives, all regarded as useful ways of framing practical communication problems—a relativism that may be unacceptable to theorists deeply committed and schooled in particular approaches. The metamodel, with its invitation to dialogue and debate among theoretical traditions, can be dismissed as a shallow platitude or condemned as an intellectually irresponsible trivialization of important philosophical differences (Martinez, 2008). In addition, the metatheoretical principle that constructs communication theory as field of metadiscursive practice is inconsistent with widely accepted epistemological assumptions about scientific research and theory, and

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seemingly reduces theory to the status mere rhetoric or idle chit-chat without scientific truth value (Myers, 2001).

And then, the seven traditions – a nice way of presenting the field for beginning students, perhaps; beyond that, however, what is one to do with them? They cannot be tested by empirical research. The definitions of traditions the reader knows well may be thought passé (so traditional) or just wrong, the presentation naïve and oversimplified, of no interest to specialized experts engaged with questions at the cutting edge of research. One may feel there is nothing much to be said about them; current research seldom concerns itself with intellectual traditions in such broad terms. If this is true of traditions the reader knows well, what can be said of traditions one does not know well? Can the brief sketches in CTF be trusted? Surely not, one may feel, or, in any case, the sketches are no substitute for the deep reading across traditions that, unfortunately, no active scholar has time to do except very selectively.

The usefulness of the traditions for mapping the field can also be questioned. Particular theorists or lines of work—especially one’s own!—can be hard to “place” in any tradition. This very common reaction by readers of CFT has several explanations. First, CTF defines the traditions for the specific purpose of constructing a metamodel of communication theory, centering each one on a concept of communication that is both highly traditional and clearly different from every other tradition in the model. While this procedure may have given us a well ordered metamodel, it presents us with a set of categories that do not reflect the current self-understandings of many scholars. Second, despite the effort to be comprehensive, gaps remain. Much of the most currently important theory seems to cut across traditions, fall in the cracks between them, or escape the model entirely. Where, for example, does poststructuralist theory “go”? We can say it is primarily semiotic (concerned with signs) but also rhetorical, phenomenological, sociocultural and critical. Does this sort of recipe (a sprinkle of this, a pinch of that) tell us anything interesting about the specific contributions of poststructuralism to communication theory? Third, scholars do not usually work “in” any one theoretical tradition, however defined; traditions are retrospective constructions but current theoretical work is forward-looking and follows unpredictable paths across the intellectual landscape. This can be a reason for ignoring any scheme of traditions.

A final set of reasons to ignore the idealistic vision of CTF is that it is biased. Not only is it biased in favor of social constructionism and against traditional notions of theory in social science, as was noted, it is also biased by a pragmatist approach to communication theory that undergirds the metamodel but was not openly acknowledged as a distinct tradition within it (see Craig, 2007, on the pragmatist tradition and the “paradox of pluralism” that emerges from this critique). The vision of CTF is also culturally biased. It is Eurocentric, of course, which has been acknowledged (Craig & Muller, 2007) but it also reflects the author’s specific US American cultural background in ways that may not be so obvious, at least to the author. In a 2008 seminar at Université du Québec à Montréal, where I had given a talk on CTF, a colleague quipped that the metamodel is “not only Western, but Midwestern,” implying not only a Eurocentric bias but one more precisely locatable somewhere in the Midwestern region of the USA. This is undoubtedly true in some sense and warrants critique (Martinez, 2008) but also, I would like to suggest, it warrants careful appreciation.

Everyone’s point of view is biased, as we Midwesterners like to say, and the only good remedy for bias is more communication, bringing in more points of view. Every reason for ignoring CTF can just as well serve as a reason to engage seriously with the problems that it presents. If the constitutive metamodel is excessively relativistic, how can we better represent the diversity of communication theory, and to what end? If the traditions are ill-defined or badly described, if there are gaps and omissions, if the view is biased,
then let us have better definitions and descriptions, newly theorized traditions, and new representations of the field from different points of view. Having already mentioned some of the barriers to engaging with the field in these ways, I conclude this short essay by offering four practical suggestions for consideration by anyone who would like to contribute to a field of communication theory.

**Suggestion 1: Cultivate theoretical cosmopolitanism.** Given the diversity of communication theory and its multidisciplinary roots, it is important for communication theorists to have some familiarity with a range of approaches without necessarily agreeing with, or having deep expertise in all of them. Theoretical cosmopolitanism has been defined as “the willingness and ability to participate in more than one theoretical conversation” (Craig, 2001, p. 236). A cosmopolitan in the usual sense is someone who is well traveled, at ease in different countries, usually able to speak more than one language (as this writer shamefully is not), but not, of course, deeply familiar with all cultures or able to speak all languages (which is impossible), and not without a certain continuing loyalty to her own native country and heritage. The theoretical cosmopolitan approaches theory with a similar attitude of curiosity and comfort in discussing different views; she travels.

**Suggestion 2: Write a comparative application.** Theoretical cosmopolitanism is especially helpful for thinking about practical problems. Framing theory tells us that the specific language we use to describe a situation can bias our interpretation of problems by focusing attention on particular causes, moral assessments, and courses of action (Entman, 1993). In situations involving conflict, naming the problem is often done as a way of *casting blame* for the problem (Tracy & Muller, 2001). It is good, then, to be able to reflect on a situation from different points of view, considering the implications of different problem descriptions. Tracy and Muller (2001) did this with regard to different descriptions of a “communication problem” in the governing board of a local school district. Using three theories as contrasting “lenses” through which to examine the situation, they found that each theory highlighted some problems while diverting attention from other problems, which led to a series of practical recommendations for problem formulation. We should cultivate a new genre of applied theoretical writing in which practical problems are analyzed comparatively from multiple, theory-based approaches.

**Suggestion 3: Write about a tradition of communication theory, and write for the field.** Clarify or reinterpret a tradition, or propose a new one. Scholars deeply committed to particular approaches can take CTF as an invitation to articulate those approaches and to correct erroneous understandings by others in the field, as Martinez (2008) did in the case of semiotic phenomenology. Propose a new tradition, as Russill (2005) did when he argued that we should recognize a distinct pragmatist tradition of communication theory founded on William James’s radical empiricism. Russill’s suggestion inspired my own effort to incorporate pragmatism into the constitutive metamodel as an eighth tradition (Craig, 2007), and the discussion of a pragmatist tradition has been carried further by Russill (2008) with regard to the Dewey-Lippmann debate, and by Bergmann (2008) with regard to Peirce’s place in the tradition. When writing on any topic in communication theory, always keep the broader field in mind. Dialogize your discourse. Consider how a problem might be framed differently in another tradition, or anticipate criticism from elsewhere in the field and give it due consideration.

**Suggestion 4: Write about the field from a different metatheoretical or cultural perspective.** The bias of CTF should provoke other theorists to intervene with alternative interpretations of communication theory or models of the field. Propose a different scheme of traditions or perhaps an entirely different way of representing the array of theoretical differences. If CTF gives us a Midwestern pragmatist view of the field, give us another, more
comprehensive metatheoretical view that is better informed by French semiotics, or by
Chinese theories of communication as harmony. With regard to the latter suggestion, recently
there has been a surge of interest in theories of communication derived from Asian cultural
traditions (Miike & Chen, 2007), which are not represented at all in CTF. Communication
theory can become a multi-cultural field of learning, for example, by attending to American
Indian ideas about productive silence (Covarrubias, 2007). But different ways of thinking
about communication may also require different ways of thinking about theory and fields
of theory. Should we seek for a Chinese principle of harmony in the field communication
theory, and would that be something different from dialogical-dialectical coherence?
References


