

The Challenge of Organizational Communication

CHAPTER

1

AFTER READING THIS CHAPTER, YOU SHOULD . . .

- Be able to describe how today's world is complicated by globalization, terrorism, climate change, and changing demographics
- Understand the concept of "requisite variety" and appreciate the need for complex thinking to cope with complex situations
- See ways in which we can complicate our thinking about organizations both by considering a variety of organizational forms and by viewing organizations that are often paradoxical and contradictory
- Understand the distinction between a "transmission model" of communication and a "constitutive model" of communication
- Be familiar with the seven conceptualizations of communication and the ways in which these domains of understanding can change our view of organizational communication

During the last few years, social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook have caught the attention of college and high school students, others who are Internet savvy, and a wide range of commentators. One option for individuals creating Facebook profiles is to note that, in explaining the nature of a relationship, "It's complicated." That simple statement could be seen as defining much of our twenty-first century world and our lives within that world. Our relationships are complicated. Our families are complicated. Our work is complicated. Our politics and government are complicated. Our global economy is complicated. Our connections with other nation-states are complicated. Our beliefs about ourselves are complicated.

Nowhere is this complexity more apparent than in a consideration of communication processes or in a consideration of organizations, institutions, and social groupings. There is little doubt that our organizational world is much more complicated than the world of one hundred years ago (think of agriculture, increasing industrialization, and the birth of the assembly line) or the world of fifty years ago (think of moving to the suburbs, long-term employment, and *Father Knows Best*)

or even twenty years ago (think of cross-functional work teams, the birth of the Internet, and the fracturing of the proverbial glass ceiling). Mark Penn (2007) contends that we have moved from the age of Ford, in which you could have a car in “any color, as long as it’s black,” to the age of Starbucks, in which the variety of beverages available is truly staggering. For an individual first confronting the array of offerings at Starbucks, this new world of choice is indeed complicated. However, this is not to say that past time periods have not taught us a great deal about ways to understand the complexity of our world today or provided us with strategies for coping with the high levels of complexity that confront us. Indeed, on a daily basis we as individuals, families, organizations, and societies find ways to live productively in this complicated world.

This textbook takes you on a journey of understanding into the complex world of organizational communication and the role of interacting individuals and groups within that world. This journey will involve trips to the past to consider how scholars and practitioners have historically approached issues relevant to organizational communication. It will also involve the consideration of a wide range of processes that make organizations complicated and that help us cope with that complexity. These include processes of socialization, decision making, conflict management, technology, emotion, and diversity. In this first chapter, however, we will take an initial look at ways in which today’s organizational world is complicated. This initial look will be a brief and partial one, but it will introduce some of the ways in which participants in twenty-first-century organizations are confronted with confounding and challenging problems. We will then consider strategies for thinking about the concepts of “organization” and “communication” that will assist us on our journey as we explore approaches and processes in the understanding of organizational communication.

OUR COMPLICATED WORLD

There are myriad ways we could illustrate the complexity of today’s world, and as we work our way through this textbook, we will discuss many of the “complicated” issues that confront us. In the last chapter, we will look at how the landscape of organizational communication has changed in recent years and will continue to change in the future. In this chapter, however, we consider four aspects of our world that were barely on the radar twenty years ago, but that today dominate much of our thinking—and our news coverage. They are globalization, terrorism, climate change, and changing demographics.

Globalization

It has become a truism to state that we now live in a global economy and participate in a global marketplace. As transportation and telecommunication systems improve, our world becomes ever more connected, both on a personal and an organizational level. The emergence of a global economy was facilitated by key political changes such as the end of the cold war and the development of the European Union and has included the emergence of a variety of institutions to help regulate

the global economy, such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. The globalization movement has led to practices such as *outsourcing*, in which businesses move manufacturing and service centers to countries where labor is cheap. In a global economy, many organizations have a multinational or international presence, with employees of a single organization found in many locations worldwide. Further, in a global economy, businesses are no longer centered in a few Western nations, but are spread among nations throughout the developing world as well.

Some commentators see globalization as a largely positive—and clearly unstoppable—development. For example, in *The World Is Flat* (2005) Thomas Friedman argues that the global economy offers exciting opportunities for entrepreneurs with the requisite skills. Many others, however, argue that globalization can lead to problems such as domestic job loss, the exploitation of workers in third world nations, and environmental problems. David Held and others consider these issues in *Debating Globalization* (2005). Held et al. consider the complex issues of trade, economic development, security, and environmental protection that come into play as we consider global economic and industrial systems. What becomes clear from all sides of the debate is that our new world involves complex interconnections between business, political, and cultural systems, and these interconnections make it difficult to fully understand the ramifications of both globalization systems and the proposed means for making globalization “work” effectively. Joseph Stiglitz, who critiques economic institutions associated with globalization in his 2002 book, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, has noted more recently that there is at least hope for dealing with these complex problems. He argues that, “while globalization’s critics are correct in saying it has been used to push a particular set of values, this need not be so. Globalization does not have to be bad for the environment, increase inequality, weaken cultural diversity, and advance corporate interests at the expense of the well-being of ordinary citizens” (Stiglitz, 2006, p. xv).

The field of organizational communication can contribute a great deal to these debates about globalization. The challenges of globalization are not just economic—they also concern messages, relationships, and systems of understanding. Some of the questions that organizational communication scholars now consider in the area of globalization include:

- How can organizational members communicate effectively in the contracted time and space of global markets?
- How can communication be used to enhance understanding in the multicultural workplaces that are a crucial feature of our global economy?
- How can communication processes in business, government, and non-governmental organizations be used to protect the rights of workers in the United States and abroad?
- How does “organizing” occur in the realm of the political and economic policy debates that are critical to the long-term direction of the global economy?
- How do corporations communicate about the balance between providing goods and services at a price preferred by consumers and providing a safe and economically secure workplace for their employees?



Case in Point: Toxic Toys

In today's global marketplace, a great deal of manufacturing is outsourced to nations such as India, Singapore, and, especially, China. The giant toy manufacturer, Mattel, closed its last U.S. plant in 2002 and now makes two-thirds of its toys in China (Harrop, 2007). Mattel owns some plants in China, but also contracts with outside vendors—factories over which the multinational company has little control. There's little doubt about what is driving this trend—a desire for profit on the part of organizations and a desire for low-cost products on the part of consumers. As Harrop (2007) summarizes: “Consider the whole picture. Big-box stores fight every penny increase in manufacturers’ prices. That immediately knocks the American worker out of the game. One retailer has actually told its U.S. suppliers to move their factories to China. This price mania has also cost jobs in Mexico, where workers are still paid better than in Asia.”

So, in the quest for profit and low price, the job of making toys—and the responsibility for keeping those toys safe—has been taken over by Chinese factories. And the quest for profit and price doesn't stop there,

as choices are then made to produce the toys with whatever subcontractors can do the job for the least money. Because of a lack of quality control, product safety suffers. Toys are exported with lead paint. Toothpaste is exported laced with antifreeze. Dogs and cats in the United States die because of poisoned pet food. And the safety record is even worse for Chinese goods that are *not* exported. Liu (2007) points out that while 1 percent of food exported to the West from China fails to meet quality standards, the flunking rate is much higher (20 percent) for food sold within China.

So what are the answers to these growing problems of product safety in the global marketplace? Within China, there is a clear need for increased government control over safety. For multinational corporations like Mattel there is a need to upgrade quality assurance systems. But as Harrop (2007) points out, there's enough blame to go around: “Rather than zero[ing] in on one country or company, let's zero in on ourselves. American consumers must understand that low prices come with a price.”

Terrorism

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, changed the world in profound ways. Subsequent attacks in London, Madrid, and elsewhere, combined with frequent news stories about attacks that have been thwarted and individuals arrested for planning more attacks, make it clear that terrorism will be a watchword in our lives for many years to come. As Oliver (2007, p. 19) notes, “in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11, the conventional wisdom was that ‘everything has changed.’” However, as Rosemary O’Kane (2007) points out in her book *Terrorism: A Short History of a Big Idea*, terrorists have been around for many centuries, and terrorism can be perpetrated by individuals, groups, nation-states, and regimes. She notes that terrorism is not a particular ideology, but is a set of strategies that involves the use of unpredictable violence against individuals and thus creates ongoing fear and suspicion among large groups of people. The effectiveness of terrorism today can be enhanced both by the wide range of technological tools available to terrorists and by contemporary urban environments that have high concentrations of residents and mass transportation.

For individuals and organizations in the post-9/11 world, the implications of terrorism are everywhere, but can be seen, especially, in two widespread areas—the “war on terror” and “homeland security.” Perhaps the most basic concern for

organizational communication scholars in approaching the war on terror is gaining an understanding of how terrorist networks and terrorist organizations operate and grow (Stohl & Stohl, 2007). Such an understanding would involve a consideration of how terrorist organizations recruit and socialize their members, how terrorist cells make decisions and develop leadership, how terrorist networks form interconnections through technology and interpersonal contact. But a consideration of the war on terror has also come to encompass military interventions such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, organizational communication scholars must also be cognizant of the complex communication processes involved in military actions and bureaucracy and the complexities of dealing with military personnel and their families during and after their service. The implications of the war on terror for organizational communication also include complex political negotiations with a wide range of government entities and the creation and dissemination of organizational rhetoric to connect institutional goals with public opinion.

Organizational communication scholars can also respond to the complexities of terrorism through a consideration of homeland security. When Brian Michael Jenkins of the RAND Corporation testified before Homeland Security Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives on January 30, 2007, he made it clear that homeland security is, at its heart, a problem of organizational communication. He notes:

Homeland security is not a television show about mysterious government agencies, covert military units, or heroes with fantastic cell phones that summon F-16s. It is an ongoing construction project that builds upon philosophy and strategy to ensure effective organization, establish rules and procedures, deploy new technology, and educate a vast army of federal agents, local police, part-time soldiers, private security guards, first responders, medical personnel, public health officials, and individual citizens. (Jenkins, 2007, p. 1)

For organizational communication scholars, then, critical questions revolve around how to develop communication systems to enhance border security, improve tracking of possible terrorist activities, and develop the ability of first-response organizations—police departments, fire departments, hospitals, military—to act quickly and appropriately in case of terrorist threats or attacks. But organizational communication scholars can go beyond this mandate to consider the role of the individual citizen as he or she encounters this organized effort of homeland security. At times, these questions will concern public relations and crisis communication, as we consider ways in which homeland security issues can best be framed and conveyed to a wide range of people. At other times, these questions will involve how organizations can manage the daily operations of homeland security, such as airport security or the passport application process, in a way that conveys understanding for the frustrations of ordinary citizens. At still other times, organizational communication scholars can contribute by enhancing our understanding of high-level policy debates in which conflicts arise between the need for security and the preservation of civil liberties.

Thus, in terms of the war on terror and in terms of homeland security, our post-9/11 world illustrates the complexity of questions that confront organizational communication scholars and students. These questions include:

- How do terror networks organize, recruit, and socialize members, and communicate across time and space?
- What communication systems can and should be put into place to best ensure the security of our borders?
- How can we help prevent our fear of terror from becoming a fear of each other?
- How can we best deliberate policy and make decisions in the changed environment of our post-9/11 world?
- How can communication systems be designed to protect and enhance the well-being of individuals who serve as first responders in the war on terror?

Climate Change

In his best-selling book *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), Al Gore argues that humanity's role in climate change is an issue that can no longer be denied and must be addressed by governments, businesses, and individuals. Though there are still some who contend that climate shifts are just part of larger natural patterns, most scientists and commentators now agree that recent changes in our climate—caused by the phenomenon known as “global warming”—can be attributed to the activities of individuals and organizations. As the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency notes:

For over the past 200 years, the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal and oil, and deforestation have caused the concentrations of heat-trapping “greenhouse gases” to increase significantly in our atmosphere. These gases prevent heat from escaping to space, somewhat like the glass panels of a greenhouse . . . the Earth's average surface temperature has increased by about 1.2 to 1.4°F since 1900. The warmest global average temperatures on record have all occurred within the past 15 years, with the warmest two years being 1998 and 2005. Most of the warming in recent decades is likely the result of human activities . . . If greenhouse gases continue to increase, climate models predict that the average temperature at the Earth's surface could increase from 2.5 to 10.4°F above 1990 levels by the end of this century. (“Climate Change,” Environmental Protection Agency, 2007).

Scientists have already observed widespread effects from climate change. Sea levels are rising, glaciers are shrinking, permafrost is melting. These changes in the natural environment lead to additional changes in plant and animal life, as growth patterns change in response to shifting environmental conditions. These changes are occurring on land and underwater, as climate change affects vast ecosystems and threatens the survival of some, such as coral reefs. Global warming also influences weather events, such as hurricanes, which gain strength over warmer ocean waters. As Mooney argues, “human beings are already changing the environments in which hurricanes form and attain their terrifying strength, which means hurricanes will inevitably change, too” (p. 260). But these changes are not necessarily consistent across the globe or even predictable. This uncertainty is clear just within the United States, as “scientists believe that most areas will continue to warm, although some will likely warm more than others. It remains very difficult to predict which parts of the country will become wetter or drier, but scientists generally expect

increased precipitation and evaporation, and drier soil in the middle parts of the country” (“Climate Change,” Environmental Protection Agency, 2007).

The role of organizational communication in climate change and global warming is widespread. Much of the human contribution to climate change can be traced to factors that began with the Industrial Revolution, such as our systems of energy production, factory manufacturing, and petroleum-fueled transportation. Thus, when searching for ways to reverse or at least slow the process of climate change, these industrial organizations play a key role. Organizational communication is also implicated in the debates about global warming and what to do about it. These debates are global ones because countries such as China and India are rapidly becoming increasingly industrialized and there are arguments about nations’ obligations to reduce greenhouse gases. In all countries, debates about the balance between economic opportunity and environmental health are rife. Organizational communication is also important in dealing with many of the effects of global warming such as the increased incidence of forest fires and weather disasters like hurricanes. Finally, addressing global warming and climate change can open up opportunities for businesses that want to raise their level of environmental responsibility and sell themselves as “green” companies to consumers. Thus, the field of organizational communication must be ready to deal with the complex questions that stem from climate change and global warming, including:



Case in Point: Green Travel

When considering industries that contribute to the problem of global warming, the travel and tourism sector can certainly be cited as an important culprit. Fossil fuels power transportation options such as planes, trains, ships, and cars, and when we get to our destinations, most hotels, motels, and resorts have large “carbon footprints” as they house, feed, entertain, and pamper us. Thus, it is not surprising that a number of organizations in the hospitality and travel industries are now making the decision to move to more “green” services and products. It’s not only good for the planet; it’s also good business.

One example of this trend is Virgin Airlines, whose chairman, Richard Branson, has pledged \$3 billion of his company’s profits over the next 10 years to combat global warming. The project—named Gaia Capitalism after the Greek goddess of the earth—will involve research and development in biofuel production, renewable-energy production, and alternative transportation options. Virgin Airlines is also looking at smaller changes that could make a big difference. Branson (2006, p. 48) notes several of these changes: “at JFK airport in New York, the average long-haul

plane takes 60 minutes to get from the gate to take-off, and burns seven tons of fuel in the process. By towing planes out to the takeoff point instead, we would save 10 percent of that fuel. By changing procedures for landing, so that planes wait on the ground for an available gate rather than circling in the air, we would save even more fuel.”

There are also examples of the “greening” of the travel industry in the area of resorts and hotels. You may already be familiar with the “pillow-top” cards asking if you’re willing to forego a daily change of sheets and towels as a way to help the environment. But some establishments are going even further in their green design and there is a movement to develop national standards for environmentally friendly hotels (“Green Your Getaway,” 2007). In short, there are more and more options for green travel, and much of this can be tied to the linking of business sense with corporate responsibility. As Branson (2006, p. 48) sums up, “by making green investment a motive for success—rather than a charitable adjunct to companies’ existence—humanity will dramatically increase the chance of its survival.”

- How can organizations reinvent themselves to reduce or eliminate their contribution to global warming?
- How can government representatives engage in productive debate about ways nations can work together to influence climate change?
- How can entrepreneurs address the “greening of organizations” as an opportunity for both profit and social responsibility?
- As climate change increasingly affects local weather events and patterns, how should local, state, national, and international agencies coordinate their activities to cope with the human consequences of global warming?
- How can organizations effectively enhance awareness of the ways in which individuals can make a difference in influencing the process of climate change?

Changing Demographics

Compared to issues like globalization, terrorism, and climate change, the concept of demographics sounds pretty tame. *Demographics* refer to statistical descriptions of characteristics of a population—things like age, race, income, educational attainment, and so on. These descriptions are, in one sense, simplistic, but they are also undeniably important. Demographics describe who we are in the most basic of terms, and thus can have a foundational impact on how we communicate with each other, how we organize, how we address critical problems in our social world, and even what those problems are in a given time and place.

The most typical way to think about demographics is to consider distributions of the characteristics of people, and to look at those distributions in a comparative sense across either time or location. In the United States, the most complete record of demographic trends is found in the Bureau of the Census data, and the most recent national census was completed in 2000. Consider a few comparisons that can be drawn from census data (Smith, 2002):

- In 1990, 9 percent of the population was Hispanic, compared to 12.5 percent in 2000. In 1990, 12.1 percent of the population was black, compared to 12.3 percent in 2000. Hispanics have now surpassed blacks as a share of the U.S. population and their numbers continue to grow.
- In 1970, 40.3 percent of American households consisted of married couples with their own children; by 2000, that percentage fell to 24.1 percent. Similarly, the percentage of households with five or more people was twice as high in 1970 (20.9 percent) as in 2000 (10.4 percent).
- The 2000 census indicates continuing population shifts from rustbelt states in the northeast and Midwest to sunbelt states—especially to the new sunbelt states such as Nevada, Arizona, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and Georgia.
- In 1930, 5.4 percent of the U.S. population was 65 years or older; by 2000, the number more than doubled to 12.4 percent of the population. It is anticipated that by the year 2050, more than 20 percent of the U.S. population will be 65 or older (“Statistics on Aging,” Administration on Aging, 2007).

In terms of sheer description, then, the United States is a dramatically different place than it was in decades past, and these different descriptors of who we are, where we

live, who we live with, and how long we live lead to dramatically different experiences as we encounter organizations and communicate in them. Consider, for example, the issue of age. Scholars often divide populations into “generational cohorts” that indicate similarities in birth year and associated similarities in experience (Schuman & Scott, 1989). Thus, my mother’s experiences as a member of the “World War II Cohort” are very different from mine as a member of the “Late Baby Boomer Cohort” or my daughter’s as a member of the “Generation Y Cohort.” In terms of work experience, members of the World War II Cohort are known for dependability, long-term employment, and relationships with organized labor. Members of my cohort are known for their ambition but also their cynicism. Members of my daughter’s generation are coming to be known as technologically savvy but also a bit spoiled in the ways of work. Clearly, a similar demographic analysis could be applied to ethnicity, family structure, social class, or household location.

Changing demographics do not just influence the organizational experience of individuals, though. They also create new challenges for organizational communication. Changing demographics result in multicultural workplaces, in workers with increasing responsibilities to aging family members, in workers with longer commutes, and in workers who telecommute. Changing demographics also pose the challenge of treating individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, races, ages, genders, disabilities, and sexual orientations in ways that respect these differences and create opportunities for meeting both individual and organizational goals. Thus, questions confronting organizational communication scholars as they consider these demographic shifts include:

- How can we communicate with members of a culturally diverse workforce in ways that respect difference and help achieve organizational and individual goals?
- How do members of the “sandwich generation” cope with the stresses of work and family concerns?
- What are the various communication patterns and needs of individuals from different age groups?
- How can we use communication technology to design virtual workplaces for employees in a variety of locations?
- How do we make the tough decisions regarding the roles of institutions and government in supporting an aging America?
- What role does communication play in assuring a level playing field for individuals with disabilities?

MEETING THESE CHALLENGES

So far in this chapter, we have briefly confronted a number of facets of our complex, changing world. The challenges of globalization, terrorism, climate change, and changing demographics were rarely considered in past decades, but today they point to the range of complex problems that must be met by individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions. The question, then, is how “organizational communication” can be conceptualized as a means for understanding and tackling these challenges.

In Chapter 4 of this text, we will learn more about a scholar named Karl Weick who has been an important influence on many organizational communication scholars. As we'll see, Weick has a lot to say about how we organize and make sense of organizing through ongoing interaction. At this point, though, it is helpful to consider one concept that Weick emphasizes: *requisite variety*. This concept suggests that successful organizations and groups need to be as “complicated” as the problems that confront them. For example, the organizational structure of a small catering service can probably be relatively simple. However, if that small catering service grows into a large restaurant or an even larger food service organization, the structure needed for decision making, payroll, customer service, training, and a myriad of other functions must become increasingly complex. The organization must be as complicated as the problem.

The same principle holds for our consideration of how we should see “organizational communication” as a means for approaching the challenges of today's world. We have talked about issues such as globalization, terrorism, climate change, and changing demographics as just a few of the complexities that must be dealt with through organizational communication. Thus, if we see these problems as complicated, we must also complicate our thinking about organizations and complicate our thinking about communication.

Complicating Our Thinking about Organizations

The first way of complicating our thinking about organizational communication is to complicate our thinking about organizations. In the first edition of this book (Miller, 1995), I defined *organization* as including five critical features, namely the existence of a social collectivity, organizational and individual goals, coordinating activity, organizational structure, and the embedding of the organization within an environment of other organizations. These critical features still hold today, but in complicating our thinking about organizations, it is important to stretch our understanding of each of these concepts. For example, when we think about the idea of “structure,” we need to consider more than basic hierarchical structure, or even more complex team structures. We also need to consider structures based on collective and communal relationships, structures that eschew hierarchy in favor of flat organizational forms, and structures that cross boundaries of time and space. When we think of the concept of “goals” we need to move far beyond the economic goals that are often assumed in discussions of the “bottom line.” The goals that drive many organizations and individuals today involve changing the world in big and small ways, or perhaps simply concern about “connection” itself.

When we work to stretch our thinking in these ways, we see that there are many examples of organizational types in today's world that were not often considered in past decades. To take a basic example, we often think about “businesses”—entities that are designed to make money—as the epitome of organizations, but scholars are now increasingly interested in the operations of *nonprofit organizations*. For both profit and nonprofit organizations, more and more organizations can be characterized as *service organizations* rather than manufacturing organizations. In areas around the globe, *nongovernmental organizations* (NGOs) are especially important in coordinating processes of change in first and third world

nations. It is increasingly common for individuals with similar needs and goals to come together in organizations known as *cooperatives* (co-ops) that are often motivated by a concern for democracy, social justice, and environmental and global responsibility. Further, with advances in computer and communication technology, organizations often do without the “brick and mortar” physical location and operate as *virtual organizations*. It is also critical to stretch our thinking to understand that the features of an “organization” are also relevant for the consideration of *social organizations* such as fraternities and sororities, or even families or groups of friends who are coordinating around valued goals and tasks.

As we complicate our thinking about organizations, it is also necessary to acknowledge that organizations are not “simple” sites where goals are accomplished through straightforward cooperation in well-defined structures. Indeed, in recent years, scholars of organizational communication have increasingly understood organizations as places where the diversity of individuals, goals, and ways of doing things contribute to highly irrational processes. For example, according to Tretheway and Ashcraft (2004), organizational communication must be approached with an appreciation for paradox, irony, and contradiction. They contend that “[a]s organizational environments become more complex and turbulent, and as diverse institutional forms merge and emerge, organizations and their members are pulled or are purposefully moving in different, often competing directions” (Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004, p. 81). These scholars believe the irrational aspects of organizational life have always existed, but that they are being intensified by current conditions in the organizational world.

Complicating Our Thinking about Communication

It is also important for us to complicate our thinking about communication if we are to deal with the complicated world that confronts us. Early models of communication were highly simplistic, arguing that communication could be conceptualized with a model like the S-M-C-R model in which a Source transmits a Message through a Channel to a Receiver. In the organizational context, this could be seen as a supervisor (source) asking for volunteers to work on the weekend (message) through an e-mail (channel) sent to all of her employees (receivers). Even when a “feedback loop” is added to this model (e.g., responses to the e-mail), it is clear that it fails to encompass the varying ways we need to think about communication. Communication is not just about sending simple messages to one or more receivers. Communication is also about the intricate networks through which computers link us to others. Communication is about the creation of meaning systems in families and cultures. Communication is about understanding a market segment to enhance persuasion and increase sales. Communication is about the multiple ways information must flow to provide aid when a natural disaster strikes. Communication is about framing information about a possible threat so that the public is warned but not panicked. Communication is about coming to an understanding within a community about issues that both unite and divide.

Robert Craig (1999) proposed a model of communication theory that helps sort out these various aspects of communication. First, he contrasts a transmission model of communication with a constitutive model of communication. In a

transmission model, communication is a way of moving information from sources to receivers, similar to the S-M-C-R model considered above. In a constitutive model, communication is seen as a “process that produces and reproduces shared meaning” (Craig, 1999, p. 125). However, Craig suggests that this simple distinction is not particularly helpful. For one thing, he argues that it’s not really a fair fight, as the transmission model is usually just presented as something easy to knock down. But Craig also believes that the transmission model *can* be useful to consider in some cases. For example, when the goal is to get evacuation information to residents in the path of a hurricane, the effective transmission of information is a lot more important than the creation of shared meaning. However, Craig doesn’t think we should stop at the simple choice between a transmission model and a constitutive model. Instead, he suggests we complicate our thinking.

Craig argues that we should recast the constitutive model of communication as a *metamodel*, an overarching way of thinking about communication. That is, if we see the constitutive model as a “model of models,” it is possible to constitute communication in a wide variety of ways. These different ways of constituting communication can provide different avenues for the development of theory and research. But more important for our purposes here, various ways of constituting communication can help us deal with the practical challenges that individuals face in organizations today. That is, there will be times when it is important to think about communication as a way of getting information from one person to another. There will be other times when it is important to think about communication as shared dialogue and a way to enhance understanding about self and others. There will be still other times when communication is best seen as a means of persuasion and motivation. Thus, Craig’s metamodel of communication can help us to meet the practical challenges of today’s organizational world.

Craig proposed seven domains of communication theory—seven different ways of thinking about how communication works in the world. These are presented in Table 1.1 and they range from the notion of communication as information processing (the cybernetic model) to communication as the experience of otherness and dialogue (the phenomenological model). Table 1.1 also considers how each way of thinking about communication might be put into play in the organizational context. It should be clear that these various approaches to communication allow us to answer—and perhaps more important, to ask—very different questions about how organizations and people work in today’s complex society.

In summary, then, our world is becoming increasingly complex, and the intricate situations that arise with globalization, terrorism, climate change, and changing demographics require multifaceted approaches to understanding. Indeed, even without these issues, life in organizations is complex enough! Thus, it is critical to complicate our thinking and discussion about “organization” and “communication” in ways advocated by recent scholars such as Trethewey and Tracy (2004) and Craig (1999). In the final pages of this chapter, we will look ahead to the remainder of the book to consider how these ideas about organization and communication will be brought to bear on traditional and contemporary approaches to the study of organizational communication and on a wide range of organizational communication processes.

Table 1.1 | Approaches to the Concept of Communication

	Communication Theorized As:	Possible Use in the Organizational Context:
Rhetorical	The practical art of discourse	Considering the communication strategies of organizational leaders during times of crisis
Semiotic	Intersubjective mediation by signs	Studying the ways that organizations create and sustain identity through corporate symbolism
Phenomenological	Experience of otherness; dialogue	Using dialogue to mediate conflict between two employees
Cybernetic	Information processing	Finding optimal ways to set up communication network system for employees who telecommute
Sociopsychological	Expression, interaction, and influence	Using knowledge about personality and interaction style to improve conflict management programs
Sociocultural	(Re)production of social order	Looking at the intersection of organizational, national, and ethnic cultures in multinational organizations
Critical	Discursive reflection	Confronting the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace through programs designed to shift beliefs about gender and power

Portions adapted from R. T. Craig (1999). Communication Theory as a Field. *Communication Theory*, 9, 119–161.

LOOKING AHEAD

Chapters 2 and 3 will take us back to consider several “founding perspectives” that have influenced the study of organizational communication. These approaches originated in other academic fields (e.g., sociology, psychology, management) and in business and industry and provide the foundation upon which the field of organizational communication stands. Several aspects of these founding approaches are important to note. First, although these schools of thought provide the historical backdrop for our study of organizational communication, they are not “dead” subjects. Indeed, the influence of these approaches is widely seen in organizations today, and our discussion of them will consider both their historic and current significance. Second, these approaches are largely *prescriptive* in nature. That is, these theorists were primarily interested in prescribing how organizations *ought* to run rather than describing or explaining how they *actually do run*. Chapter 2 will take us back to

the early part of the twentieth century to explore classical and bureaucratic approaches to the understanding of organizational communication. In Chapter 3, we will move to the middle and later years of the twentieth century to consider two related approaches: human relations and human resources. In human relations approaches, the spotlight is on individual needs; in human resources approaches it is on the role of employees as valued contributors to organizational functioning.

In Chapters 4 through 6 of this textbook, we will consider three additional ways of viewing organizations. In these more contemporary approaches—systems, cultural, and critical—the focus shifts from the founding approaches considered in Chapters 2 and 3. First, these contemporary approaches constitute ways to *understand* and *explain* organizational communication. In contrast to founding approaches, they are not prescriptive theories, but are theories that can be used to enhance our understanding of *any* organization, be it guided by classical, human relations, or human resources practitioners. Second, these approaches are primarily used by scholars rather than practitioners, although there are, of course, important pragmatic implications that stem from all of these approaches. Third, all three of these approaches continue to exert substantial influence today in terms of how organizational communication is studied. An organizational communication scholar would find research stemming from all three of these approaches in current academic journals.

Systems, cultural, and critical approaches provide very different frameworks for understanding organizations, however. The systems approaches we discuss in Chapter 4 look at organizations as complex interactions of systems components and processes. The cultural approaches we look at in Chapter 5 consider organizations as emergent networks of values, norms, stories, behaviors, and artifacts. Finally, the critical approaches we consider in Chapter 6 emphasize organizational power and aspire to the emancipation of marginalized voices within the organizational context.

In the second half of the textbook, we will move our focus from approaches that inform our understanding of organizational communication to the specific processes to which these approaches have been applied. What do I mean by *process*? Simply something that *happens* in an organization. Organizations are marked by constant activity. People learn about new jobs, make decisions, deal with conflict, cope with customers, program computers, form alliances, institute change, and cope with differences. All of these communication processes have been the focus of organizational communication scholars, and the last half of this book will consider our knowledge about *what* happens in these processes, *how* it happens, and *why* it happens.

The first four chapters that consider organizational communication processes can be seen as “enduring” processes because they consider things that have probably been happening in organizations for as long as there have *been* organizations. In Chapter 7, we will look at assimilation, or the processes through which individuals attach to—and detach from—organizations. Chapter 8 investigates how communication influences organizational decision making, and Chapter 9 presents theories and research on the role of communication in organizational conflict. Then, in Chapter 10, we look at communication and change processes and the leadership processes that are often crucial in terms of both change and stability.

Finally, in the last four chapters of the textbook, we will consider some of the organizational communication processes that have emerged in the last twenty to thirty years as the workplace has changed and evolved. These “emerging” processes in organizational communication certainly existed in past organizations, but current developments in the workplace have brought these issues to the forefront, and they increasingly demand the attention of both organizational practitioners and researchers. In Chapter 11, we will look at a fundamental shift in the way we have come to view organizations and the people in them. This is the shift from assuming organizations are always “rational” and “logical” to acknowledging the role of emotion in organizational life. In Chapter 12, we consider the phenomenon of cultural and gender diversity in the workplace, considering the experiences of women and people of color, and the challenges facing managers in diverse organizations. In Chapter 13, we examine communication technology in the workplace, and how technology has shifted the way we work and think about work. Finally, in Chapter 14, we conclude in much the same way we began, by considering trends that are changing the landscape of organizations.

Discussion Questions

1. How have organizations that you work in or have dealings with been affected by issues such as globalization, terrorism, climate change, and changing demographics? How do these issues have different effects on different people and different kinds of organizations?
2. Consider how airports deal with homeland security. What organizational communication processes have changed as a result of the threat of terrorism? Do you think airports and airlines have dealt effectively with these changes? Why or why not?
3. What kinds of organizational structures and processes stem from globalization? Why are these new structures and processes necessary? How do they enhance—or detract from—the quality of life for individuals working in or with the organizations?
4. How would each of the communication domains considered in this chapter approach the organizational issues that arose in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the broken levees in New Orleans? How do these different lenses help us understand the complexity of organizational communication processes?