

Theory in Public Relations Brings Sense To Teaching Communications Theory

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Teaching theory in communication and mass communications presents a significant challenge for a specialist in public relations. The concepts and theories presented here are the result of the struggle, on the part of the author, with differences and similarities in communications and public relations theories. If they fit together, how do they do so? What does feminist theory and critical theory have to do with pragmatism or systems theory? Does public relations adopt these theories in whole, or in part?

A good theory course in the communications fields should begin with just that, a discussion of theory. For purposes of this paper, all communications theory is conceptualized as essentially media effects. Media effects here will encompass both influence from the media and its messages to the audience as well as contributions from the audience in directing the form and extent of media influences (Levy and Windahl, 1985; McLeod, Kosicki, & Pan, 1991). Within media effects, the two major points of controversy are modernism and post-modernism. Within modernism, logical positivism, American pragmatism, structural-functionalism and systems theory are covered. Theories that serve as a bridge between modernism and post-modernism are: scientific reality, interpretive empirical theory, positive relativism, Dervin's differencing, dependency theory, and conflict theory. Under the sub-heading of post-modernism are symbolic interactionism, critical theory, culture, feminist and chaos theory. Finally, an attempt is made to bring together the opposite ends of this conceptual horseshoe with Rogers' diffusion of innovations, J. Grunig's situational theory of public relations, and critical/rhetorical theory in public relations.

Before continuing, however, the discussion should be delimited for space purposes but normally would be included as part of a communications theory course. That would be the consideration of the media as institutions. What Siebert, Peterson and Schramm developed in 1956, the "four theories of the press": authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and Soviet-totalitarian.

MODERNISM

Modernity (Best & Kellner, 1991) began after feudalism and the Middle Ages. It opposed traditional societies and is characterized by innovation, novelty and dynamism. Modernity denotes the processes of industrialization, individualization, commodification, bureaucratization, and rationalization. Best and Kellner avowed that modernity's promises of liberalization masked forms of oppression and domination. Postmodernism was said to begin with the advent of computers and modern media technologies—leading to the global village of Merrill (1974) and Bagdikian (1989) and the medium is the message of McLuhan (1964). It celebrates relativism and interpretivism, that theories at best provide partial perspectives on the world. Postmodern theory rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favor of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation and indeterminacy.

Under the rubric of modernism I would place logical positivism, American pragmatism, structural-functionalism and systems theory.

Logical Positivism. Logical positivism (Tan, 1985) is the traditional scientific method of explain, predict and control. It assumes there is a real world outside the scientist. The theorist sets up hypotheses to test and see how close those theories come to objective reality. Objectivism and empiricism are other labels for this perspective on theory.

American Pragmatism. Craig, 1989, said that social scientists should stay with the empirical method of hypothesis testing and reproducible methods (objective). He said, however, that there is a constitutive role of emergent social structure that can fit into the framework of the empirical method. This is the view of American pragmatism. Theory influences how people in society think and talk about their own activities. This process shapes those activities and the emergent social structures produced and reproduced by them. The constitutive role, then, makes explanation, prediction and control insufficient as goals. The goal becomes theory as an integrated part of social practice. Researchers would continue to use empirical methods to investigate empirical assumptions and consequences of the constitutive or practical theory.

Structural-functionalism. The next theory would be structural-functionalism, that suggests social phenomena occur from the interactions of social structure and the functions those structures serve (Prior-Miller, 1989). This theory traces its roots directly to logical positivism and is an outgrowth of the writings of Durkheim (1947) and Weber (1968). Of paramount importance to structural-functionalism is the whole, assuming that organizations and relationships exist as part of a larger system, much as any single part of the human body exists to serve the whole. The processes that occur in organizations, such as cooperation, conflict, or communication, adjust to each other to maintain the whole. Organization structures then, are a result of the functions they serve; the functions served determine the structures. In the early '70s, communication scholars noted the lack of consideration of structural-functionalism in mass communication research (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1973).

Systems Theory. Systems theory extends from the positivist (objective) theories discussed thus far, specifically structural-functionalism. Systems theory also considers the whole paramount over the parts (von Bertalanffy, 1969) but emphasizes the integration of the parts—like the human body (Toth & Heath, 1992) where the parts are vital to keep the system functioning. Systems theory is known, too, as hermeneutics, the concept where the whole cannot be known without the parts and the parts cannot be known without the whole. Windahl and Signitzer (1992) cited Katz and Kahn (1978) and Goldhaber (1986) in creating a systems model. In systems term, then, the unit of analysis is not any one thing, person or event in isolation but a relationship between people and environments. These relationships can be approached partly through communication. The assumption being that social structures stay together through meaning shared by people who belong to the system (Windahl & Signitzer, 1992).

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COMPROMISE THEORIES

The next group of theories I term as compromise theories, and may be middle-range to find congruence between modernism and postmodernism. They are: scientific reality, interpretive empirical, positive relativism, Dervin's differencing, dependency theory and conflict theory.

Scientific Reality. The first one, closest to modernism and related to American pragmatism, is scientific reality. Its premise is one of external reality, apart from social construction of reality by individuals (Fitzpatrick, 1993; Greenwood, 1991). However, that reality may never be reached. It is informed by emergent and socially created realities. Subjectivity serves to prove objectivity (Greenwood, 1991). Scientific reality moves beyond a positivist philosophy to consider social relationships in context. A realist view of human relationships examines not only how external events affect them but also how internal events, the purpose and reasons behind them, affect human interaction. The realist philosophy supports developing objective, causal explanations for relationship processes. All the while it considers also clear, subjective justifications for its claims (Greenwood, 1991; Sappington, 1990).

Interpretive Empiricism. The next theory is cited by J. Grunig (1992) as interpretive empiricism. Putnam and Cheney (1983, 1985) described social scientists who set up hypotheses to be tested from the ground up (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) using naturalistic inquiry to find what the subjects of study describe as their own situation. The results, however, may be that the conclusion reached by the theorists may not match those of the subjects of study. Interpretive empiricism, despite this shortcoming, is an approach to merge the objective and subjective dichotomy. Social scientists construct theories and by doing so construct meaning for the reality they observe and measure (Laudan, 1977; Shapere, 1984; Suppe, 1989).

Positive Relativism. L. Grunig (1992) described a medium between the objective and the subjective or modernist and postmodernist as positive relativism, a position that neither asserts nor denies an objective reality. Its roots are psychological (Bigge, 1971) and deals with a reality defined as that which people make of their experiences. It needs the results of the five senses to prove a theory or hypothesis worthwhile. Objects derive their qualities from the total situation rather than apart from their context. This notion of nothing existing apart from a larger scheme is consistent with systems theory.

Differencing. Dervin (1993) weighed into the controversy between positivism and relativism or the empirical versus the rhetorical/hermeneutic when she used the tried and true metaphor of the blind men and the elephant. She described the problem as each blind man feeling a different part of the elephant and describing accurately their share of the whole. Her position is culture versus agency, culture being the whole, and agency being the plurality and free will of the parts. This viewpoint, however, still dichotomizes the mass communication field. What is useful for a course in mass communication theory would not be all the isms but the issue of difference. What are the differences that disrupt communication among people? The structure or culture versus agency distinction is most often identified with Giddens (1984).

Dependency Theory. Another theory I label as compromising is older, from DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1976, 1989). They interpreted Newcomb's symmetry model (1956) of self and other, orienting to the object in a triangulation toward society. Their three points of the triangle are audience, society and mass media. They said that people have various levels of dependence on mass media based on the amount of disorder, conflict and change in society among these three poles. They essentially used Weaver's (1977) concept of need for orientation, where the effect of mass communication depends on message relevancy and uncertainty of an individual about a particular subject. The key seems to be

peoples' need to reduce ambiguity. Mass communication is very powerful if it reduces ambiguity through defining and structuring reality.

Conflict Theory. The final compromise or middle-range concept that has a little different orientation comes from conflict theory. The conflict perspective assumes that conflict is the basis of social interchange and the product of social interchange (Conrad, 1990; Follet, 1940; Prior-Miller, 1992; Robbins, 1990). Organizations, rather than being the products of the consensus of individuals or organizations interacting with each other (subjective, critical/rhetorical, and symbolic interactionism), are products among participants in conflict. Conflict theory assumes that conflict is an inevitable part of social interactions because of the incompatible, competing goals and values of individuals and organizations. Conflict theory (Rush, 1993) looked predominantly at how conflict can be resolved within and without the organization—that it is good to solve conflict for society to progress. Rush investigated how the mass media can serve as a mediator in society to resolve problems among competing groups.

POSTMODERNISM

The third part of my mass media effects conceptual horse-shoe is the postmodern and includes symbolic interactionism, critical theory, culture, feminist and chaos theory and comes primarily from the receiver or audience perspective.

Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic interactionism has its roots in the empirical modernism and logical positivism. It grew out of some of the earliest efforts by sociologists to understand the interactions among people and the impact those interactions have on society (Prior-Miller, 1992). Among the seminal thinkers were Meade (Chicago School, 1934), and Kuhn (1970). The concept of symbolic interactionism (Heath & Bryant, 1992; Prior-Miller, 1992) is that people create their own reality (social reality, social constructivism). They create reality through interpreting symbols received from one another. People use symbols in their interactions and the meaning of those symbols are in a continuous state of negotiation. Heath and Bryant called this interchange of symbols the symbolic exchange of language or rhetoric.

Critical Theory. The next theory, critical theory, stems from Marxist and authoritarian viewpoints in that the media is manipulated by those in power. The theory's mission is to expose oppression, alienation, and injustice in organizations (Putnam & Cheney, 1983). The mass media flows in a one-way direction, to sway audiences and it is incumbent on audiences to critique the powerful to change the system so communication is more audience-centered (Toth & Heath, 1992).

Critical studies are significant breaks with the old, established order, and the new is regrouped around a different set of premises or themes. Rather than looking at how communication assists societal structures, the critical scholar would ask whose interests are served in society and what role do they play in creating and maintaining power and domination (Toth & Heath, 1992).

Culture. Culture is different from these other postmodern theories in that it views society as hermeneutic, the "parts and whole" cannot be considered separately. L. Grunig (1992) saw culture as symbols and meanings in communication (back to the symbolic interaction) and cited its fit with systems. Systems theory, however, views society as whole-part. Culture views the two as inseparable and together, and symbolic interaction views the process as communication from part to whole. Wagner (1981) and Agar (1993) viewed culture as the co-construction of meaning. Hall (1959) and later Carey (1989) saw communication as culture and culture as communication. He said communication does not create laws to explain events but that communication seeks to understand events and diagnose meanings.

Feminist Theory. Feminist theory also is audience and receiver-oriented. Logical positivism has been extensively criticized in

feminist research for it division between theory and practice, between researcher and the object or the audience of the research. Liberal feminists work with the male-dominated system and radical feminists work to overturn and transform it (Hon, 1992; Van Zoonen, 1991). Creedon (1993) criticized system theory because it supports existing, patriarchy systems. Reinhartz (1985) discussed the making explicit of implicit values and norms; those values being feminist, more person-oriented. Toth (1992) said research must not be separated from its subject. There is a mutual process of creation occurring between researcher and subject. Fine (1993) called for an infrasystem rather than a supra or subsystem in systems theory that would transform patriarchy to the implicit values and norms L. Grunig (1992) also mentioned.

Chaos Theory. Finally, in the postmodern view I bring Chaos theory. Chaos theory (Cottone, 1993) makes sense at the global level. It is the extreme allowance of relativism, interpretation and agency. Its pluralism is chaos or disorder. It sees order in disorder, and it sees sudden and profound changes, fluctuations and transformations. Nothing in chaos theory, no variable is not considered. If positivist science dismisses data that are not relevant, chaos states there is nothing that is insignificant.

To be fruitful in mass communication studies, Cottone (1993) said chaos theory must look at three themes: a multidisciplinary effort, an investigation of extreme cases, and work that is transformative in nature. Chaos theory must, in Cottone's translation of J. Grunig (1989b), change the worldview of society and organizations toward communication.

THE MAGNETIC FIELD

So, where does this media effects paradigm, the conceptual horseshoe of modernity and postmodernity, lead? Perhaps it leads to some configuration of the six compromise theories previously discussed. I propose that this horseshoe also may create a magnetic field to bring the two poles of objective/positivism and subjective/rhetorical together. One source of this magnetism may be diffusion of innovations; another would be public relations theory.

Diffusion of Innovations. One way the poles could come together is through the diffusion of innovations concept of Rogers (1983). This theory is a process, like the communicating of Dervin (1993) and the interacting of systems theory that begins with: (1) innovation; (2) channels; (3) time; and (4) with society—that Rogers used to describe how knowledge (the mass media) interrelates on an interpersonal level (persuasion/rhetorical) to reach what Rogers and earlier Kincaid (1979) called convergence to mutual understanding.

Rogers and Kincaid (1981) claimed the combination of the mass media and the interpersonal is the most effective for attitude change. Mass media channels reach large audiences, spread information and change weakly held attitudes. Interpersonal channels provide a two-way exchange of information and are more effective than mass media in dealing with resistance or apathy from the audience. Rogers' (1987) current view of the diffusion process is based on the convergence model of communication that he and Kincaid developed. Communication, now, is a process where participants create and share information with one another to reach mutual understanding. The model's weaknesses are a pro-innovation bias, assuming that innovations are good in and of themselves and an individual blame bias, as opposed to system blame.

The convergence model, as extrapolated by Windahl and Signitzer (1992), is the interaction discussed earlier where communication takes place in a social reality, an environment where certain social factors may be decisive. Instead of sender, receiver, and message being so relevant, participants and shared information are important. In most communication models, the individual is the unit of analysis. In the network model of Rogers (1986), the dyad linked by communication and the groups within the group are studied. Mass media effects, in this context, arise from joint activity and affect all participants. Rogers characterized a

communication network as consisting of interconnected individuals linked by patterned communication flows.

Public Relations. The convergence and mutual understanding of diffusion of innovations leads to the preeminent models and situational theories in public relations (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The ideal model is the two-way symmetrical that leads away from the context/distribution of rhetorical theory (Heath, 1992; 1993) to collaboration and mutual problem-solving of the two-way symmetrical model. In the past, rhetorical theory has emphasized one-way persuasion but recently Heath (Toth & Heath, 1992; Heath, 1993) has described a mutual persuasion model of communication. Like rhetorical public relations theory, the two-way symmetrical model emphasized the receiver or audience view of an issue in strong alignment with the postmodern view, the listening and caring view of feminist theory and the deconstructionist stance of culture and chaos theory. In public relations terms, these audiences are called publics. Publics arise in response to the consequence, pro or con, that an organization has on people as it pursues its mission. Publics organize around problems and make issues of problems that actively affect them (J. Grunig, 1993).

Mass communication researchers have done little to define and explain the behavior of publics, the most extensive research being Rogers (1983) diffusion of innovations. The situational theory (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, J. Grunig & Childers, 1988) is the most researched of the segmentation of publics theories and could contribute greatly in this era of mass media publics being delineated through technology. Indeed, audiences of media are no longer mass in the classic sense (Hiebert, 1992; Lowery & DeFleur, 1983; McQuail, 1987; Wright, 1983).

Rhetorical research in public relations comes into play here in that symbolic behavior influences issues (Heath, 1992). People or publics use words and visual symbols to "share and evaluate information, shape beliefs, and establish norms for coordinated collective action" (p. 17). Rhetoric also helps explain how people and organizations manage their relationships in a situation that requires a response to a problem that arises from that situation. One or more publics channel messages in the situation surrounding each message. This situation influences which facts and arguments in the message are relevant. It constrains what can be said and how it can be phrased on an interpersonal level. Issues management studies such as those by Crable and Vibbert (1983, 1985) and Heath and Nelson (1986), asserted that an issue can be created by the organization and that through the use of symbolic strategies, communication can influence the public policy debate. Although typically thought of as one-way persuasion, Heath (1992, 1993) argued against one-way rhetoric intended to dominate and persuade the opposition, and instead to mutual persuasion.

Public relations, then, developed theories, models, and rhetorical stances that in turn draw from systems theory and structural functionalism on the modernist side of the horseshoe in that the whole predominates over parts. In that both sides of an issue can change perspectives, aspects of the two-way models and the rhetorical view also draw from the critical-alleviating power, the symbolic interaction-symbols negotiate meaning or parts over whole, to culture-parts and whole together; and feminist and chaos theory (and conflict theory) to transform how communication is viewed in society.

Given the number of theories involved on the conceptual horseshoe of mass communication from a public relations perspective, granted it is somewhat convoluted and difficult to follow in such a brief treatment of the subject. However, with a 16-week semester to teach mass media effects, the modern and postmodern view, it might just be possible to cover most of these subjects.

Plowman's monograph is excerpted from a top teaching paper at a previous AEJMC convention. The complete text of past convention papers can be found at the PRD website, <http://lamar.colostate.edu/~aejmcpr> (Kirk Hallahan, webmaster).

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