

Running head: COMMUNICATION THEORY & PRACTICE: AN OVERVIEW

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The threshold to the 20th century marked the onset of a two-tiered set of developments in the academic fields that were to feed into post-1945 scholarship on communication. On the one hand, specialized academic disciplines became the order of the day, operationalizing intellectual ideas into explanatory concepts for empirical research, while catering to the needs of professions and bureaucracies in modern society.

Whereas both national and academic cultures differ (Löblich 2007), the received, remembered history of US communication study (Dennis & Wartella 1996) is indicative of a widespread view that communication research stands on the shoulders of specific social scientific disciplines (Hardt 1999). Although Schramm (1997,) described its development with reference to “forefathers” (Lewin; Lasswell, Harold D.; Lazarsfeld, Paul F.; Hovland, Carl I.), the conceptual and analytical substance derived from impersonal disciplines (political science, sociology, social and experimental psychology).

Importantly, a similarly partial history of communication studies is also described as per the humanities' perspectives. In addition to the historical and traditions already noted, the candidates for disciplinary sources include art history, literary theory, linguistics, and film studies. Interestingly, the second edition of Lowery and DeFleur's widely circulated textbook on the (social scientific) “milestones” of mass communication research included reference to an ascending “meaning paradigm” (Lowery & DeFleur 1988, 455), which might admit some humanistic milestones. Only seven years later, however, in the third edition, this anticipation of a possible convergence had been replaced by a return to multiple parallel “focused theories,” each of which might explain, “some set of events or phenomena that has clear boundaries” (Lowery &

DeFleur 1995, 397). The crediting of relevant disciplines and the definition of interdisciplinarity remain contested.

On the other hand, communication research has always been at least tangentially interdisciplinary. This is evident, not just in Whiggish histories regarding the multidisciplinary origins of the field, but also in some of the most influential contributions to its analytical concepts and techniques. At least two such sources can be identified. First, semiotics and structuralism, in multiple variants and in combination with other traditions of inquiry, for instance, rhetoric and hermeneutics, have provided detailed and rigorous frameworks for studying what Ferdinand de Saussure, a century ago, called “the life of signs in society.” Growing out of nineteenth-century studies of logic and language, these traditions inspired much linguistics and literary theory from the inter-war period, and were consolidated into a mainstream of humanistic media studies from the 1960s while subsequently also influencing social scientific research on communication and culture.

The second family of interdisciplinary traditions is more closely associated with the social sciences and technical and systemic conceptions of social life. Cybernetics, with a lineage in engineering and natural sciences, came into its own during the 1940s and 1950s as a generalized science of control and communication regarding machines and humans alike. A related, but different, tradition of systems theory, having lost its original dream of a theory of all systems, remains influential in the weaker sense of systems thinking. In addition, theories of information as a logical, statistical, and algorithmic category have been key to both the design and study of communication media throughout the post-1945 period.

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