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Abstract

Communication theory is not only *about* society; it is also *in* society and contributes to the evolution of the communication practices that constitute society, thereby participating in processes of social change. This theme is illustrated by examining the ideas of *network* and *ritual* to show how each emerged as a practical concept in Western culture long before it was theorized explicitly for scientific purposes, and how each concept has developed in conjunction with profound changes in the communicative constitution of society. Next, it is argued more generally that communication theory and practice interact in the medium of metadiscourse, and that the discourse about communication, on both theoretical and practical levels, also engages critically with other discourses such as traditional authoritarianism and political realism, thus being caught up in social conflicts. In this complex scene of metadiscursive controversy and social conflict, communication theory participates in social change. Finally, it is suggested that this view on the role of communication theory in social change can contribute to recent conversations about the development of Asian communication theory.

Keywords: communication theory, communicative constitution of society, metadiscourse, theory and practice, social conflict

Teoría de la Comunicación y Cambio Social

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Resumen

La Teoría de la Comunicación no se hace únicamente *sobre* la sociedad, sino que también está *en* la sociedad y contribuye a la evolución de las prácticas comunicativas que constituyen la sociedad y es, de esta manera, que participa de los procesos de cambio social. Este tema se ilustra examinando las ideas de *red* y *ritual* para mostrar cómo estas emergieron como concepto práctico en la cultura occidental mucho antes de que fueran teorizados explícitamente con fines científicos, y cómo cada concepto se ha desarrollado en conjunción con cambios profundos en la constitución comunicativa de la sociedad. A continuación, se argumenta de manera más general como la teoría y la práctica de la comunicación interactúan en medio del metadiscurso, y que el discurso sobre comunicación, tanto a nivel teórico como práctico, también se pone en contacto de forma crítica con otros discursos como el autoritarismo tradicional y el realismo político, quedando así atrapado en conflictos sociales. En esta compleja escena de controversia metadiscursiva y de conflicto social, la teoría de la comunicación participa en el cambio social. Finalmente, se sugiere que este punto de vista sobre el rol de la teoría de la comunicación en el cambio social puede contribuir a conversaciones recientes sobre el desarrollo de la teoría de la comunicación asiática.

Palabras clave: teoría de la comunicación, constitución comunicativa de la sociedad, metadiscurso, teoría y práctica, conflicto social

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7 C&SC –Communication & Social Change, 1(1)

In this paper I reflect on communication theory as an element of social change. I argue that communication theory is more than just a conceptual toolset for explaining or influencing social change. Communication theory has a growing presence in the discourse of contemporary societies. It is not only *about* society; it is also *in* society and contributes to the evolution of the communication practices that constitute society. Insofar as communication theory participates in the constitution of society, the introduction of communication theory potentially *is* social change. It cultivates particular ways of understanding human social existence in terms of communication processes, ways that may challenge traditional cultural understandings and practices.

In the following sections I introduce two examples to illustrate how communication theory can be a conceptual tool for *explaining* society while also existing *within* society and participating in processes of social change. Specifically, I examine the concepts of *network* and *ritual* to show how these ideas originated and continue to evolve in particular cultural traditions in conjunction with profound changes in the communicative constitution of society. Second, I step back to take a broader view of *metadiscourse*—a term defined as discourse about discourse that includes both theoretical and ordinary practical ways of talking about communication. Communication theory engages critically with ordinary ideas and ways of talking about communication, such as network and ritual. The discourse of communication, on both theoretical and practical levels, also engages critically with other discourses such as traditional authoritarianism and political realism. In this complex scene of social conflict and metadiscursive debate, communication theory participates in social change. In a final comment, I suggest how this view on the role of communication theory in social change may contribute to recent conversations about Asian communication theory.

Network

While the concept of network has had an important role in theories of communication and social change, it also has had a significant role in the evolution of social practices and self-understandings away from traditional and bureaucratic structures of hierarchy and toward the flattened and

connected forms of interaction that Castells (1996) has described as the *network society*.

According to Mattelart (1996, 2000), the word *network* originally related to lace making and had nothing to do with communication. In the 16th century the term was borrowed as a scientific metaphor to explain the circulation of blood. Soon after, blood circulation was used by French engineers and planners as a metaphor to describe connected channels of transportation and communication such as road and canals, through which the commercial and cultural lifeblood of the nation flowed. In the 19th century the concept of network was extended so that it referred not only to connected communication systems but also to the universal bonds of human communication that the growth of communication networks was beginning to make possible. Thus, the concept of network initially evolved in practical and scientific discourses in conjunction with modernist ideas about communication as flow, rationalization, and universal progress. From the late 19th century the model of an electrical network became increasingly central to the network concept, and the idea of network was increasingly associated with decentralized control structures (Eriksson, 2005).

Of course, most of this happened before there was ever an academic field or a scientific body of knowledge explicitly called *communication theory*. A scientific analysis of communication networks developed within the social psychology of groups in the 1930's and took an important place in mass communication theory as the interdisciplinary field of communication research was institutionalized in the 1940's. Early studies of mass communication in political and marketing campaigns led to the famous "two step flow" hypothesis of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). According to this hypothesis, the effects of campaign messages are mediated by networks of interpersonal communication. Campaign messages flow from the mass media to opinion leaders who may choose to pass them on to others within their personal networks of influence. By the 1970's the analysis of communication networks was integral to communication theories in fields ranging from the diffusion of innovations (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971) to organizational communication (Farace, Monge & Russell, 1977). The theory of communication networks has continued to develop and by now has reached a high level of sophistication (e.g., Monge & Contractor, 2003). The

9 C&SC –Communication & Social Change, 1(1)

conceptual tools of network analysis by now are being used to study everything from international data flows to online social networks.

Thus, network has become an important scientific concept in communication theory, but it has also become much more than that. Since the 1970's, the network has become an increasingly prevalent social ontology—a fundamental way that institutions and members of society describe the social world and make sense of what is going on (Eriksson, 2005). The network is thought to provide a better alternative to traditional ways of understanding social processes in terms of structure and hierarchy. Traditional and modernist models that picture society as an organism or a machine imply a need for hierarchy and centralized control. The model of society as an open network linked by channels of communication implies a need for flexible, self-organizing communication processes that empower individuals and agencies to form network structures around particular shared interests, activities or problems, for example through online social networks such as Facebook. The explosive development of new information and communication technologies has, of course, enabled such new forms of networked interaction and organization, has promoted and given material form to the network ideal of society, and apparently has been driven by an imperative to bring us ever closer to that ideal model.

It is clear that these developments have involved some interplay between communication theory and social practices. Consider, for example, the communication practice called “networking.” According the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) this term was first used in the 1970's to refer to a process of using social networks for professional or personal advantage. The concept of networking preceded the Internet and was not initially framed in terms of communication technology. Initial uses of the term in the field of family therapy seem more directly related to social psychological theories of interpersonal networks than to developments in technology. The idea of networking became popular in the women's movement as a communication technique for women to advance in business and professional life, a way of compensating for the traditional gender hierarchy and patterns of social interaction that favored men. Thus, the second usage example of “networking” reported by the *OED* appeared in a magazine called *Working Woman* in 1979, and networking was soon widely touted as a “great new way for women to get ahead” (Welch, 1980). By now, of course, people

everywhere engage in “networking,” and communication technologies such as online social networks have become important ways of doing so. It seems that the practical concept of “networking” that emerged in society in the 1970’s not only derived from earlier theoretical ideas about interpersonal communication networks but also became a stimulus for later social networking practices, technologies and related ideas in communication theory.

From networks of roads and canals in the 16th century through online social networks in the 21st century, we can see that the concept of network has developed both in theory and in social practice, and that the two lines of development have intertwined through time. Network is a theoretical concept that is useful for explaining society in part because related concepts of network have evolved *within* society as an important element of social change from the earliest stages of modernization through the postmodern network society. The theory of communication networks arises from and contributes to, sustains and is sustained by, the social ontology of networks.

Ritual

Sociocultural theories of communication going back to Durkheim have used the concept of ritual as a way of explaining communication practices in society (Rothenbuhler, 1998). James W. Carey, in his classic essay, “A Cultural Approach to Communication” (reprinted most recently in Carey, 2008) took this line of thinking through a radically reflexive turn. Carey pointed out that communication theory has long been dominated by a *transmission* model based on a metaphor of transportation. In this transmission view, communication is a flow of messages across space from sources to receivers for purposes of influence or control. Carey contrasted the transmission view of communication with an alternative model that he called the *ritual* view, and he argued that the ritual view should have a more prominent place in communication theory and practice than it currently does. The ritual model is based on the metaphor of a sacred ceremony. In a ritual view, communication is a collective performance that is meaningful to the participants and that functions to sustain their community through time. In a ritual view, as Carey said, the act of reading a newspaper is not primarily a

matter of receiving information but is more like participating in a religious ceremony that ritually reaffirms the reader's place in a familiar world.

Transmission and ritual could be thought of as alternative ways of conceptualizing and explaining communication for scientific purposes, but Carey's point in offering this distinction was quite different. He did not regard these models of communication as scientific inventions in the first instance. These ideas had already existed in Western culture long before they were formally theorized for scientific purposes. Both views of communication had religious roots, the ritual view deriving from ancient practices of communal worship and sacrament, the transmission view from practices of communicating the Christian faith to foreign lands, especially in the age of European exploration and colonization that began in the 15th century. At this point, the history of the transmission model and the explanation of its dominant role in society and later in communication theory converge with the history of communication networks sketched earlier. Networks, after all, are constituted by channels of transmission, and in the age of European imperialism, networks were extended around the world to facilitate the flow of commerce and to bring far-flung colonial provinces under central control. The transmission model evolved along with technological advances in transportation and communication and came to dominate both practical and theoretical thinking about communication, just as the industries spawned by those same technologies assumed a dominant role in the economy. In the specific context of US American history, according to Carey, the ritual view of communication survived in discourses that celebrated the USA as a nation of small, local, face-to-face communities, while the transmission view remained dominant through discourses that celebrated urbanization, large scale industrialization, and the growth of national power. For Carey, it is the need to revitalize public life and to recover a sense of community under conditions of postmodern cultural fragmentation and social change that calls the ritual view to our renewed attention. What we need, for Carey (as I interpret him), is not more information but a democratic public life constituted by more meaningful and inclusive communication rituals and undergirded by a social ontology that understands society more in terms of culture and community than in terms of information and power.

However one may critique Carey's specific interpretations of history (see [Packer and Robertson, 2006](#), for some critiques), there remains a larger point about communication theory, history, and culture that I wish to emphasize here. Communication theory does not arise as a pure scientific invention used to explain society. Rather, communication theory already exists implicitly within cultural practices before it is ever formally written down as theory. Changing ideas about communication have contributed to processes of social change, not only as tools for facilitating change but as essential elements of social change. The intellectual discipline of communication theory only further contributes to this process and makes it more explicit and self-conscious, as we showed earlier with regard to concepts of network and networking.

In a reflexive metatheoretical perspective such as Carey's, even the transmission model of communication is nothing other than a cultural ritual—a way of talking about and practicing communication that expresses and sustains a particular culture in which communication is associated with information flows, power, and influence. This Euro-American cultural concept of communication-as-transmission has spread around the world as an element of the modernizing process in global culture and economy. Carey's analysis implied that that progressive social change in a postmodern world would be promoted by a renewed emphasis on the ritual view in communication theory. Of course it is true that Carey's specific interpretation of the ritual view was rooted in Euro-American history and culture no less than was the transmission view, but his larger, metatheoretical point was that *all* communication theory is inextricably cultural. The idea of communication does not transcend culture but emerged historically in specific cultural traditions, diffused globally as an essential element and agent of modernization, and continues to evolve as it interacts with different cultures. As I have written elsewhere:

The eruption of the communication idea around the world in globalized forms and in culturally adapted localized forms needs to be understood within the general process of economic and cultural globalization with all its attendant puzzles and controversies. The rapid international growth of the academic communication field is bound up in ways we have yet to

13 C&SC –Communication & Social Change, 1(1)

understand with the emergence of “communication” as a keyword in global culture.... Understanding this relationship is an urgent research problem at the discipline’s foundation (Craig, 2008b, p. 17).

Carey’s ritual model exemplifies a *cultural turn* in communication theory that responds to this global situation in which communication technologies, industries, professions, and practices are developing rapidly around the world and creating a demand for academic communication studies (Craig, 2008a), and yet it becomes apparent in this process that communication itself is not a relatively culture-free technical field like physics or engineering. Communication and communication theory are deeply cultural, and the growing emphasis on communication almost everywhere in the world represents a significant cultural change that has to be worked out in each society in its own terms. Like the theory of communication networks, then, the cultural turn in communication theory participates in processes of social change in which changing communication concepts and practices are a central element. And it is obvious that these changes were already happening in the world as part of the general modernization/ globalization process long before there was ever a formal discipline of communication theory.

Metadiscourse, Conflict, and Social Change

My recent thinking has drawn me toward studies of *metadiscourse* as a way of exploring the relevance of communication theory to what is going on in society (Craig, 1999, 2005, 2006). Metadiscourse is self-reflexive discourse, talk about talk, the pragmatic use of language and other semiotic resources to influence meaning and action by commenting on some aspect of a contextual discourse (Craig, 2008c). In linguistics, metadiscourse is often studied to understand the use of specific linguistic devices such as discourse markers and reported speech. Communication theory is interested in a broader range of metadiscourse:

Discourse about discourse-in-general is also meta-discourse. People trading stories about poorly run business meetings or writing newspaper columns about rules of etiquette for the use of

mobile phones in public are engaged in meta-discourse with a relatively broad scope. So are scholars writing academic books and articles about media, discourse, and communication. All of these forms of meta-discourse participate in the ubiquitous social processes through which norms and meanings for communication are continually negotiated. (Craig, 2008c, p. 307)

The key point for our present purposes is that communication theory and ordinary practical talk about communication are both metadiscourse: both are forms of discourse that comment reflexively on something in the communication process, and both have pragmatic functions that influence the production of meaning and the norms of communication in society. Metadiscourse is the common semiotic medium in which theoretical and practical metadiscourse overlap and influence each other—for example, similar or related ideas about media freedom may appear in academic theory and research, journalistic commentary, and everyday talk, all of which contribute to the evolution of media freedom as a cultural and political concept. If communication theory participates in social change, metadiscourse would seem to constitute the primary medium in which that participation occurs.

In light of this theoretical analysis of metadiscourse I have recently been pursuing interpretive discourse analytic studies of arguments about communication in public metadiscourse. For example, I have studied a wide range of international English internet discourse about “dialogue,” noting issues of contention, lines of argument, and embedded assumptions (Craig, 2008d). I have found that arguments about whether certain parties can or should engage in a mutual dialogue often hinge on power relations or moral considerations. Thus, dialogue may be opposed because it may require participants to compromise absolute moral principles or because the power equation between the parties will disadvantage one side or the other.

Although this research is still in early stages, I hope it will begin to shed light on the role of changing concepts and practices of communication in social change. The aspects of communication that are argued about in public are those that are controversial in some way, presumably because they involve underlying social conflicts. For example, debates about the possibility of “dialogue” between Muslim and other groups in some

European countries involve conflicts about multiculturalism and national identity as well as religious differences. Calls to engage in “dialogue” rely on the assumption that differences in society should be addressed through a peaceful communication process rather than in some other way, such as a power struggle among groups. The assumption that communication is the best way to solve social problems reflects the growing influence of what Cameron (2000) has called the “communication culture,” a culture in which the importance of good communication is heavily emphasized. Conflict may arise between advocates of dialogue and religious or cultural conservatives who associate the recent emphasis on “communication” with unacceptable trends toward secularism and moral relativism. Conflict may also arise between advocates of dialogue and political realists or dominant groups who associate the emphasis on “communication” with political weakness in conflict situations better resolved by gaining and use using power, perhaps even by means of force or violence. It is in social conflicts such as these that “communication” comes to have a specific range of meanings in a particular society. The study of metadiscourse is intended to illuminate those meanings, thus making them available for theoretical analysis and critique.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to offer a brief suggestion as to how these thoughts on communication theory and social change might apply to a topic such as “Global Challenges to the Future of Communication: Digital Media and Communication Freedom in Public Discourse,” the theme of the First Indonesian International Conference on Communication to which this paper was first presented in 2010. The suggestion emerges from a reflection on recent discussions about the need to develop “de-westernized” or specifically Asian approaches to communication theory.

Since the 1980’s there has been a movement, primarily led by Asian scholars, to de-westernized communication theory by developing approaches based on Asian cultural traditions (e.g., Miike, 2010; Wang, 2011). This movement is extremely important for the field of communication. The argument I have been making in this paper implies that that the development of Asian approaches to communication theory is not just a matter of bringing Asian traditions of thought more fully into the field, nor is it just a matter of

creating new theories of communication that are more sensitive to Asian cultural patterns, although both of those goals are certainly important. I would like to suggest, in addition, that the development of Asian communication theory involves engaging theory and research with processes of social change in which changing cultural ideas and practices of communication are already implicated. One aspect of this work is to pay careful attention to the *metadiscourse* of a particular society or region, to identify the concepts and assumptions about communication that have currency, and especially to understand how the idea of communication is caught up in conflicts and controversies that swirl around social change movements.

What does this mean for a discussion of “Digital Media and Communication Freedom in Public Discourse” in an Asian or specifically an Indonesian context? Of course, I do not know at all! I know too little about the topic in general and lack the cultural background necessary to say anything of interest about it specifically with regard to Asian or Indonesian societies. Instead, I would invite others, who know much more about these things than I do, to consider questions such as these: What can we learn by examining terms like “digital media” and “communication freedom” in the *metadiscourse* of a particular society, as these and related terms in local languages are used in media, public, and ordinary interpersonal talk, especially with reference to current social conflicts? Do these terms have specific cultural meanings that can be illuminated by an examination of their metadiscursive uses? What larger normative visions or conceptual models of communication do they imply? What are the discourses (traditional, political, economic, etc.) with which they come into conflict, and what does this tell us about the broader processes of social change to which they may be contributing? We have every reason to expect that the academic metadiscourse of communication theory can enrich our thinking about these sorts of questions, thereby contributing to the development of culturally grounded yet globally relevant communication theories and practices.

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