

Organizational Communication Research: Key Moments, Central Concerns, and Future Challenges

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This chapter summarizes the state of theory and research in organizational communication. The authors highlight the central concerns and major challenges addressed by organizational communication researchers. They begin by isolating the central intellectual and practical currents, and then they identify defining and constituting concepts in organizational communication. The chapter concludes with the authors' proposals of fruitful areas for future research.

MORE than a generation ago, Katz and Kahn (1966) argued that organizations are best conceptualized as open systems in which the behavior of members takes on a structure that is properly viewed at a collective, organizational level. In contrast to earlier perspectives that concentrated almost exclusively on the individual psychology and interpersonal relations among organizational members, the open-systems view emphasized that organizations are

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psychological, social, and symbolic constructions in and through which individuals respond to their environments. Control mechanisms such as norms and rules serve to curtail strictly individual needs in favor of wider organizational ones. In this manner, organizations function by balancing the changing demands of the environment with control mechanisms that guard against potentially overwhelming uncertainty.

Katz and Kahn thus framed individual action within a *network* of relationships, in effect foregrounding communication in the construction and enactment of organizations. This dynamic perspective on organizations—central to the open-systems view—simultaneously stressed the role of interconnectedness and the inherent importance of the external environment. Absent from the perspective, however, was an explicit focus on social interaction *per se*, an oversight soon redressed in Weick's (1979) claim that through processes of enactment, selection, and retention, organizational members construct their organizations through communicative processes.

In Weick's view, organizational members create their environments through enactment, or ongoing interaction, that emphasizes the phenomena to which they pay attention. They then select from among many possible interpretations of the enacted environment, thus attaining a degree of collective sensemaking through communication. Finally, members retain the interpretations that seem to work for them, setting up a locus of choice for future patterns of interaction and attention (enactment). It is through communication, Weick suggested, that we continually construct the reality of which we are a part and engage in "retrospective sensemaking" in order to rationalize the meanings of our actions. Communication is the core process in organizations, or, in Weick's terms, the core process of *organizing*.

Communication is thus viewed as *organization*—constituting organizations and not just occurring within them. Weick both precipitated and navigated the shift from the metaphor of the organization as "container" of communications to a view of communication as fundamental to the study of organizations. This shift has been crucial to the development of organizational communication as a distinct area of study, away from the strictly container view predominant from the 1940s to the 1960s and toward perspectives that explicitly consider communication phenomena as central processes of organizing (Cheney & Christensen, 2000; Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977; Monge, 1973; Smith, 1993; Taylor, 1993). At the same time, however, this devaluing has come at some cost to the discipline.

In examining the state of contemporary organizational communication research, we stand to learn from the open-systems perspective and its dual emphasis on the environment as a source of organizational input and on the importance of diverse communication phenomena in organizations. In view of current social, political, technological, and economic developments, the centrality of the environment and the diversity of communication processes are critical to the study of organizational communication, with a far greater magnitude than a generation ago. Pressures toward globalization, new types of social movements and organiza-

tions, tensions between integration and segregation, team-based restructuring, the imperative of customer service, and the rise of network and virtual organizations, to name only a few developments, suggest ways in which contemporary organizational communication theories and concerns parallel, and of course expand, open-systems perspectives initiated a generation ago.

At the same time, we have recently come to appreciate organizational "closedness," in its dialectical relationship with openness, as organizational boundaries become problematic (see Luhmann, 1990). That is to say, with greater fluidity of organizational boundaries there is a concomitant desire to reassert organizational identity and to maintain coherence and cohesion. In this regard, we invoke the systems perspective (Poole, 1997) and, later in this essay, interpretivism (the other predominant perspective on organizational communication during the past two decades) as heuristics for clarifying current themes in the study of organizational communication.

In this essay we highlight the central concerns and major challenges addressed by organizational communication researchers who study the communication-related aspects of diverse organizational phenomena in the world today. We proceed by first examining key moments in the study of organizational communication in order to sketch central intellectual and practical currents. We explicate both "explicit" and "implicit" histories of the field, treat reviews of the metatheoretical perspectives and methodological orientations in organizational communication, and then describe the interpretive and critical "turn" in the field during the 1980s. Throughout this discussion, we identify defining and constituting concepts of organizational communication. In the final section we review continuing preoccupations in organizational communication research, and we propose areas for further work and exploration. Cutting across theoretical, methodological, and practical concerns, we hope to challenge researchers to confront directly the complexities of contemporary organizational environments and communication processes.

KEY MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

In order to examine where the field of organizational communication has been, and thus where it is going, we propose to delineate its historical development, outline its theoretical perspectives and methodological orientations, and examine prevalent research topics to date. In doing so, we focus on organizational communication's "explicit" history, or its documented and recounted pedigree, as well as on its "implicit" history, or factors that are typically overlooked in such "recipe" treatments. In turn and in the subsequent section, we detail the evolution of the field's interpretive/critical turn in an effort to provide a richer understanding of roots, key moments, and directions.

Explicit History

Although the study of organizational communication phenomena in a sense dates back to antiquity (Allen, Tompkins, & Busemeyer, 1996), extant histories generally locate the genesis of organizational communication as an identifiable academic field in the 1940s and 1950s (Putnam & Cheney, 1983, 1985; Redding, 1985; Redding & Tompkins, 1988). Three sources account for the discipline's conceptual roots: traditional rhetorical theory, human relations prototheories, and parallel models of early management/organization theories (Redding & Tompkins, 1988). Organizational communication currently enjoys a rich interplay with the allied academic disciplines of administrative science, anthropology, business communication, corporate communication, industrial organizational psychology, management communication, organizational behavior, political science, social psychology, sociolinguistics, sociology, rhetoric, and even literary criticism (Poole, Putnam, & Seibold, 1997).

In tracing the emergence of organizational communication as an academic field, Redding and Tompkins (1988) have sketched three major periods of development. During the foundational "era of preparation" (1900-1940), the emphasis was primarily on communication skills training. The "era of identification and consolidation" (1940-1970) saw the emergence of what was termed "business and industrial communication." According to Redding (1985), it was during the decades of the 1940s and 1950s that the seeds of organizational communication (as a unique and identifiable discipline) were sown, largely through a series of seminal academic publications, several social science programs, and the birth of graduate programs in organizational communication. In the "era of maturity and innovation" (after 1970), empirical research under the rubric of "organizational communication" proliferated, and efforts were made to develop the theoretical premises and philosophical bases of organizational communication.

Implicit History

Clair (in press) questions the utility of defining and articulating the explicit history of organizational communication at all, due to issues of self-definition, legitimacy, and the "diversified heritage" that doing so implicitly ignores. In her view—essentially a Foucauldian perspective (e.g., Foucault, 1984)—any historical account or self-definition of organizational communication is framed in a dominant and constraining organizational discourse. If organizational communication exists only when we establish the discipline as "officially" recognized—or legitimated—by a university, this fails to recognize or acknowledge the larger philosophical conversations that preceded our "academic birth" and from which organizational communication has in part sprung. Accordingly, in most historical accounts of the genesis of organizational communication, figures such as Aristotle, Marx, and Mead are given lip service at best, and our "diversified heritage" is partially lost. In addition, of course, certain interests become privileged over oth-

ers. And along with the prevalence of the container metaphor has flourished an administrative or managerial bias, in which the organization itself is seen as a social actor with ever-expanding rights and power (see, e.g., the sociohistorical critique in Coleman, 1974).

Although we can take issue with aspects of Clair's (in press) critique (see McPhee & Seibold, in press), we should perhaps worry less about self-definition while continuing to explore diverse theoretical and methodological options. Accordingly, we have the opportunity to take advantage of our "loose coupling" as a discipline, rather than rush toward constraining attempts at *capturing* organizational communication. Similar to Beniger (1993), who calls for communication researchers to realign and embrace the *subject* of communication and not the *field* (which he views as blind to many important communication phenomena), Clair urges us to focus less on disciplinary boundaries and more on communication and organization as the basis of and impetus for our work.

Metatheoretical Perspectives and Methodological Orientations

Historical/Evolutionary Orientations

Redding and Tompkins (1988) have outlined three somewhat overlapping historical phases of the development of organizational communication theory and research from 1900 to 1970. During the "formulary-prescriptive" phase (1900-1950), organizational communication focused primarily on skills-based training and prescriptive advice aimed at achieving "effective" communication. For example, early studies of organizational communication prescribed media choice, timing, and message structure for managers. During the "empirical-prescriptive" phase (1950-1970), largely descriptive, empirical studies began to emerge. Although methodological sophistication and the depth of information in studies began to increase, the overall emphasis remained on prescriptive advice for managers, rather than on the articulation and testing of theoretical perspectives. During a parallel "applied-scientific" phase (late 1940s-1970s), researchers sought to position themselves as neutral and objective observers of communication phenomena, working toward a science of organizational communication. Emphasis was placed on measurement, variable analysis, and hypothetico-deductive designs intended to test competing perspectives.

In reviewing the contents of 15 communication journals from 1979 to 1989, Wert-Gray, Center, Brashers, and Meyers (1991) found that the most heavily researched topics were information flow and channels; climate and culture; superior-subordinate communication; power, conflict, and politics; and public organizational communication. In an ambitious review of 889 articles from 61 journals between 1980 and 1991, Allen, Gotcher, and Seibert (1993) identified 19 areas of organizational communication research. In descending order of the areas most frequently researched, they list interpersonal relations (including superior-subordinate, interviewing, stress, conflict, and gender and race); communication skills

and strategies; culture and symbolism; information flow and channels; power and influence; positive outcomes of communication; decision making and problem solving; communication networks; cognitive, communication, and management styles; organization-environment communication interface; technology; language and message content; structure; uncertainty and information adequacy; groups and organizational effectiveness; ethics; cross-cultural research; climate; and theoretical advances. We can thus see an expansion of organization communication's scope, especially since 1980, to include a broader range of topics and research perspectives.

Perhaps the most wide-ranging review of the development of organizational communication research is that provided by Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman (1996; see also Putnam, 1998). These reviewers identify seven "metaphor clusters" that, implicitly or explicitly, have framed lines of research in organizational communication and their attendant views of communication: conduit, in which organizations are treated as containers or channels for information flow and communication is seen as transmission of messages; lens, in which organizations are conceived as perceptual systems or eyes for environmental scanning, gatekeeping, and the like, and communication is filtered; linkage, in which organizations are represented as networks or systems of nodes linked by communication that functions to connect them; performance, in which organizations emerge as coordinated actions—the performative result of communicative social interactions; symbol, in which members' interpretive communication activities produce organizations as novels; voice, in which "communication is expression and organization becomes a chorus of stilled or singing voices" (p. 379); and discourse, in which organizations appear as texts consisting of genres and dialogues, manifestations of communication as conversation. Most interesting about this review is Putnam et al.'s recognition of the variety of understandings of communication itself as embedded in different studies of organizational communication.

Allied Perspectives

Beyond historical perspectives on the evolution of scholarly emphases, organizational communication research also has been located in metatheoretical stances that are roughly consistent with Burrell and Morgan's (1979) classic two-dimensional typology of schools of sociological thought and inquiry. The dimensions address assumptions about (a) the nature of social science (objectivist/subjectivist) and (b) the nature of society (maintenance or regulation/enlightenment or radical change). When the two dimensions are crossed, four main paradigms emerge. Briefly, *functionalists* view reality as significantly external to the individual's experience of it and behavior as concrete and tangible. Research within this paradigm aims to arrive at empirical knowledge by means of scientifically rigorous methods, as traditionally understood. *Radical humanists* take reality to be socially and intersubjectively constructed, yet ultimately dominated by the ideological factors that individuals both create and maintain. *Radical structuralists* view soci-

ety as objective, like functionalists, but by contrast view many aspects of the social order as oppressive and dominating. Their goal is to attempt to uncover the sources of this oppression. *Interpretivists* view reality as socially constructed by the interplay of individuals' subjective experiences, and research is aimed at uncovering the nature and role of symbolic forms that maintain social order. Unfortunately, these terms have sometimes been employed in simplistic ways (especially so with *functionalism*) that ignore both metatheoretical assumptions and blurred genres (Cheney, in press; Geertz, 1973).

Scholars have applied Burrell and Morgan's model to organizational communication (e.g., Daniels & Spiker, 1994; Putnam, 1983), despite the fact that its importation from sociology necessarily neglects research traditions actually reflected in organizational communication (Clair, in press; Mumby & Stohl, 1996). For example, Putnam (1982) used Burrell and Morgan's typology to examine the basic assumptions underlying research on prevalent concerns of communication channels, networks, communication climates, supervisor-subordinate communication, and symbol systems in organizations. She noted the contribution that each paradigm can make to the study of organizational communication phenomena and outlined problematic applications as well. Later, Rosengren (1993) observed that, due to political and intellectual changes, the relative importance of the Burrell-Morgan typology's two major dimensions (objective/subjective versus regulation/change) has shifted toward the objective/subjective side. He called for cross-fertilization across this divide to invigorate the study of communication. Although the typology provides a structure by which to organize theoretical perspectives, the boundaries between these perspectives should be seen as somewhat fluid. More recently, Deetz (1996) and Mumby (1997a) have both reconfigured the typology for special application to organizational communication, recognizing subtle distinctions between and among different postures toward interpretation and critique.

Alternatively, Euske and Roberts (1987) have noted traditional organizational metatheories (classical-structural, human relations, behavioral decisions, and systems theory) and have offered recent organizational theory perspectives that assume a distinct organization-environment view. They demonstrate how resource-dependence, population ecology/organizational life-cycle, and institutionalization theories all address complex and important relations between organizations and their environments, and they encourage increased attention to this relationship among organizational communication researchers. Especially, Euske and Roberts call attention to some of the physical and biological structures and constraints of organizing.

Communication-Centered Approaches

Krone, Jablin, and Putnam (1987) developed a more communication-oriented perspective for classifying theoretical paradigms by pointing out that researchers' views on human communication guide the study of organizational phenomena. Krone et al. mapped four conceptual frameworks (mechanistic, psychological,

[concertive] control/identification, and critical theory); challenging perspectives to the constructs that developed in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., resistance/transformation, postmodernism); and studies that cross organizational boundaries (e.g., member-client relationships, organizational rhetoric). Conrad's framework is interesting especially because it attempts to position various organizational communication research approaches in terms of one of the most basic issues in all of social inquiry: individual action or agency versus social structure or constraint.

Taylor and Trujillo (2000) and Miller (2000) provide detailed treatments of qualitative and quantitative methods, respectively, in organizational communication research. In addition to charting a variety of criteria for evaluating qualitative research (on a continuum from quasi-positivist to interpretivist to critical-postmodern), Taylor and Trujillo discuss how critical theories, feminism, and postmodernism challenge investigators to confront and critique power issues in the research process. Miller surveys a variety of quantitative research practices (experimental research, survey and interview research, and coding of communication behavior and archives) and addresses criteria and challenges relevant to each.

Also prominent among recent metatheoretical attempts to analyze the contours of organizational communication research is the work of Deetz (1996, 2000), who offers an update to Burrell and Morgan's (1979) typology in proposing schools of thought that he terms "discourses." He replaces the categories of functionalist, interpretivist, radical humanist, and radical structuralist with those of normative, interpretive, critical, and dialogic—directing attention explicitly to communication processes. Deetz argues that clarifying each perspective's claims and procedures will help to foster greater understanding across perspectives and more rigor within them. Although this reframing incorporates postmodern organizational communication perspectives, Clair (in press) notes that it fails to account sufficiently for feminist and multicultural views. Notwithstanding these limitations, Deetz's approach highlights key developments emanating from the interpretive turn in organizational communication scholarship during the 1980s, which we address in the following section.

Before we examine the interpretive turn in organizational communication (and related developments in postmodernism and critical theory), it is worth noting that the area of organizational communication is vibrant and flourishing. New journals and book series in the area, increases in Ph.D. degrees, the proportion of Organizational Communication Division members in the International Communication Association (forming the second-largest division), awards to scholars in this area, major federal grants, interdisciplinary collaboration, and a host of other indicators reflect the vitality of scholarship focusing on the description, analysis, understanding, and critique of communication practices in contemporary organizational life.

In no small part, this has been associated with the advances and continued importance of scholarship loosely coupled within the broad "systems" perspective we have noted thus far (see Farace et al., 1977). Indeed, many of the new theoretical understandings of communication and organization that we identify later in

interpretive-symbolic, and systems-interaction), each reflecting basic assumptions about human communication. The mechanistic view approaches communication as a transmission process in which truthfulness is a goal of communicators. Adopting an essentially psychological view takes into account how individual characteristics influence communication by casting communicators as active participants in the communication process. An interpretive-symbolic approach emphasizes the action of communication. In this way, the communication is seen as it creates and sustains the organization. Finally, the systems-interaction perspective assumes that the overall communication system shapes organizational behavior and treats communication as an evolving system. From this perspective, the sequences of communication behaviors are considered the locus of communication.

Other theorists' reviews of the field have been grounded in the view that organizational communication is composed of complementary but distinct theoretical and methodological perspectives. Redding and Tompkins (1988) note modernist, naturalist, and critical orientations to communication inquiry, characterized, respectively, by emphases on prediction and control, understanding and anticipation, and consciousness-raising and emancipation. Putnam and Cheney (1983) employed Habermas's (1971) three modes of scientific inquiry to analyze and critique dominant research traditions in organizational communication: the empiricist (which focuses on interaction and language in order to understand shared norms and experiences), and critical (which emphasizes liberation from unnecessary means of domination) approaches to the study of organizational communication phenomena. Putnam and Cheney sought to promote a "healthy pluralism" that might serve to revitalize traditional areas of organizational communication research. They later outlined several emerging approaches to the study of organizational communication, such as information-processing, rhetorical, cultural, and political perspectives (Putnam & Cheney, 1985; they would now add technological approaches to this list). These terms refer to "families" of perspectives in which core concepts and concerns are shared; they do not correspond to specific epistemological and theoretical perspectives.

In surveying the development of key constructs in organizational communication between 1985 and 1999, Conrad (1999; Conrad & Haynes, 2000) has identified five "clusters of scholarship"—all unified by an underlying theoretical concern with the relationship between symbolic action and social/organizational structure, but differing in how scholars in each deal with the dualism between action and structure. Conrad (1999) characterizes organizational communication scholarship as reflecting research that privileges structure over action (e.g., functionalist research on information exchange, superior-subordinate relationships, and interpersonal interaction) or action over structure (e.g., interpretivist studies of culture, meanings/messages, symbolism, and ambiguity); three subclusters that strive to integrate action and structure (i.e., structuration, research on unobtrusive

In retrospect, there seem to have been two principal motives behind the rethinking of the bases of the field of study that led to the Alta conference and Putnam and Pacanowsky's book. The first was a determination to distance organizational communication research somewhat from the preoccupations of management. As we have noted in our discussion above of the reviews by Redding (1985) and Redding and Tompkins (1988), the field of organizational communication began as a practical concern with teaching communication skills to people in organizations. Practitioners tended to take on the attitudes of their managerial partners: a kind of top-down view of organizational process and structure, not unlike that prevalent in management science. The people at Alta were determined to stake out an independent role for organizational communication research, one that was clearly distinct from that taught in business schools. That motive still seems to be operative (Mumby & Stohl, 1996).

The second motivation can be traced to a growing dissatisfaction with the then-prevailing mode of research and its restrictive view of what constitutes both data and theory. The social sciences in North America had for some time subscribed to a version of research that emphasizes the centrality of attributions of cause and effect, the necessity for a precise operational definition of variables, the meticulous collection and categorization of data, investigator objectivity, and quantitative (preferably statistical) analysis. This amalgam of commitments has been variously termed *positivism*, *functionalism*, and *operationalism*, although none of these terms would be accepted today as fully representative because each stands for no more than one of the component elements of *strict empiricism*, typically associated with some particular school or author. By the end of the 1970s, empiricism, to use the term that is most neutral in its associations, was drawing fire because it so limited research possibilities that some believed it had become an intellectual straitjacket. The Alta conference thus had some of the qualities of a manifesto in that it announced an opening up to new kinds of research.

Intellectual Roots of the Interpretive Tradition

In outlining alternatives, the innovators could draw on a rich 20th-century intellectual tradition. Two principal influences can be seen in the transformation of perspective from empiricism to interpretivism: phenomenology and structuralism, or, more specifically, semiotics. The two great innovators of 20th-century phenomenology were German professors: Husserl (1964, 1976) and Heidegger (1962). Husserl's particular contribution was to turn attention to the cognitive processes involved in arriving at knowledge. He reminded us that knowledge is not simply a recording of experience but an active construction of it, in which the categories we begin with delimit what we can subsequently know. Heidegger, the more radical of the two thinkers, challenged the entire tradition of Western philosophy, and its preoccupation with prejudice-free knowledge, by reiterating the situatedness of all experience and the circumstantial limits

this essay are those of researchers working within the systems tradition: self-organizing systems theory (Contractor, 1994), reticulation theory (Corman & Scott, 1994), public goods perspectives (Fulk, Flanagan, Kalman, Monge, & Ryan, 1996; Monge et al., 1998), assimilation perspectives (Jablin, 1987; Kramer, 1993), and adaptive structuration theory (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). Similarly, investigations arising out of the community of scholars with a systems orientation are central to the emerging research foci we identify later: technology (Corman, 1997), groups and organizations (DeSanctis & Poole, 1997; Lammers & Krikorian, 1997; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996), networks (Heald, Contractor, Koehly, & Wasserman, 1998; Monge & Contractor, 2000; Rice, 1993; Stohl, 1993a), change (Lewis & Seibold, 1996; Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994), and globalization (Monge & Fulk, 1999; Stohl, 2000). As but one example of current activity in these areas, the 1997 Alta conference was devoted to the theme of "self-organizing processes," especially to generative mechanisms of various social systems that help systems both "know themselves" and create the conditions necessary for social reproduction and adaptation. Further, this same subject was the topic of a jointly sponsored theme session between the Organizational Communication and Information Systems Divisions at the 1998 ICA conference, and papers from these sessions appeared subsequently in a "Dialogue" section of *Management Communication Quarterly* (Contractor, 1999; Hawes, 1999; Houston, 1999; Krippendorff, 1999). Finally, important conceptual, technological, and methodological advances have emanated from researchers in this area: computational modeling (Hyatt, Contractor, & Jones, 1997), collaborative technologies (Contractor, Zink, & Chan, 1998; Flanagan, in press), and methods for coding and data-analytic techniques (Holmes & Poole, 1991; Poole & DeSanctis, 1992).

THE INTERPRETIVE MOVEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The year 1981 was a critical time for organizational communication studies, for during that summer a group of communication scholars met at a mountain retreat just south of Salt Lake City, Utah, to consider where the field had been and where it should be going. The outcome of this summer conference was a volume edited by Putnam and Pacanowsky (1983) that has become a landmark in the evolution of the field and in the field's narrative about itself. The contributors to that volume pointed the way to more adventurous approaches to the conduct of research than were previously recognized as valid. In a real sense, the conference and the book signaled a commitment to the establishment of a genuine discipline of organizational communication, in the full academic meaning of that term. It brought to the center of our attention two concepts of research that are referred to as *interpretivism* and *critical perspectives* (Putnam, 1983).

such situatedness imposes on knowledge. Together, Husserl and Heidegger problematized the pretensions of any empirical inquiry that aims to produce value-free findings.

Phenomenology, in its pristine expression in Husserl and Heidegger, is dauntingly abstruse and almost inaccessible to any but professional philosophers. It evolved to become an important influence on social research initially through the interpretations of one of Husserl's students, Schutz (1962, 1964), and subsequently through others whom Schutz in turn influenced—Garfinkel (1967), Cicourel (1964, 1973), and Sacks (1989), who transformed phenomenology into ethnomethodology and then into conversation analysis. In this revised form phenomenology emphasized two ideas, both of which have had profound effects on how we conceive of organizational communication: (a) the *indexicality* of all language (i.e., its inevitable situatedness in some identifiable sphere or domain of life) and (b) the *reflexivity* of language (i.e., that property of language-in-use that has as its consequences not merely that the meaning of an expression is tied to an occasion of use but that the occasion itself is a construction of language that is being used by people to do practical things).

Structuralism (or, more specifically, semiotics) is the other great interpretive innovation of the 20th century. Its first proponent was the Swiss philologist Ferdinand de Saussure (1915/1966), who is credited with being the founder of modern linguistics. His conceptualization greatly transcends linguistics, however, because what he was aiming for was a general science of *signs*. What Saussure accomplished is still a matter of debate (Harris, 1987; Thibault, 1997), but on one point there is no disagreement: It was Saussure who obliged us to take seriously the idea that language, like other symbolic modes of communication, is a system, with its own internal dynamic and logic. Language is not merely a passive instrument, or neutral medium, by which we represent the world; instead, it is a kind of active agent that imposes on us an ideological filtering of experience (Burke, 1966). Language becomes an object of study in its own right.

Structuralism and semiotics flourished in the 1960s, but their impact on interpretivism was mediated by two influential figures, neither of whom can be counted as a structuralist, although the thinking of both exhibits a structuralist influence: Foucault (1969/1972) and Derrida (1976, 1988). Foucault most cogently exemplifies Saussure's counsel to look at, rather than through, language and to understand how its "discursive formations" (as Foucault calls broad patterns of thought and talk) establish the patterns of social life even as they mediate its processes. In Habermas's (1970, 1984, 1987) and Deetz's (1992) colorful phrase, language is capable of "colonizing" an organization, and as it does so it instantiates relations of power that inevitably privilege some voices while silencing others. Derrida's central concern is to counter what he feels to be the ingrained prejudice of seeing language as no more than a secondary accessory to experience—like the "decorative" view of rhetoric prevalent from the 16th through the early 20th centuries. Our experience of the world, Derrida has consistently argued, is not made immediately "present" to us; it has to be first "written" so that we can

recognize (re-cognize) it. Text is not just an incidental by-product of living and interacting but its essential basis.

Trends in Interpretive Research

All of these ideas can be found, singly or in combination, in the organizational communication literature that was inspired by the interpretivist turn, even though scholars have only occasionally referred to the origins of their perspectives. What is truly remarkable is the diversity and fecundity of this research. It is not our intention to review in detail the intellectual expansion that followed the Alta conference; this has already been done. Instead, to illustrate our theme, we recall in brief summary some of the principal directions of research that have emerged during the past two decades.

Ethnographically Oriented Research

The interpretive movement in communication studies coincided with another development in an allied field, the increasing preoccupation of ethnographers with their own society (Van Maanen, 1988). The result has been the emergence of a new kind of communication study, one that features what Geertz (1973) has called "thick description." The researcher employs the methodology of the anthropologist to conduct highly detailed observation of people in organizational contexts, over a protracted period of time and through prolonged interaction, in order to produce an interpretation of their culture. To the extent possible, the observer tries to see the world as his or her informants see it through their own eyes.

One interesting consequence of the ethnographic turn in organizational studies was the highlighting of the centrality of organizational culture as a construct. There was in the 1980s a fad in management studies centered on the idea that culture is something that can be molded and managed, and as such culture is the key to enhanced productivity. But here the frontier between management and organizational communication thinking reemerged. As Smircich (1983) reminded us, thinking of culture as something that an organization *has* is not the same as seeing culture as what an organization *is*. If culture is something an organization "has," then it can be shaped; if it is what the organization "is," then even the attempt to "shape" it becomes one additional index of what it is. To the interpretivist the practice of "managing" culture is merely an instance of managerial culture.

Rhetoric and Narrativity

Interpretivism has provided a renewed stimulus to rhetoric, one of the traditional branches of communication studies. The modern organization faces a constant challenge in its internal and external relations to sustain a positive image of itself (Cheney & McMillan, 1990). Organizations often speak for populations and constituencies whose views, considered at the individual level, may be far from

unanimous. The rhetorical perspective on organization reveals a complication of Aristotle's rhetorical situation (with its elements of speaker, message, and audience) today, messages often exist in public discourse without clearly identifiable sources, the discrete message may not be as important as a broader pattern of discourse, and audiences internal and external to the organization are likely to be both heterogeneous and overlapping (Cheney & Frenette, 1993; Heath, 1994). Organizational rhetoric then becomes a delicate balancing act of taking positions that are representative, but not alienating, a challenge well illustrated by Cheney's (1991) study of the public positions of the Roman Catholic Church on controversial issues. The value of rhetorical analysis similarly becomes evident in contexts where constructing an effective public argument is the difference between survival and serious loss, as in the case of a recent dispute in which a major hydroelectric developer was pitted against a Native population that risked seeing its territory and means of sustenance invaded by dams (Cooren & Taylor, in press). In the rhetorical context, Eisenberg's (1984) concept of strategic ambiguity in communication and Markham's (1996) study of the ethics of ambiguity in managerial directives take on particular relevance.

The interpretive approach has similarly revitalized the study of *narrative* in organizational contexts, in recording both how members create meaning out of ambiguous circumstances (Boje, 1991) and how the organization itself can be thought of as a tissue of narrativity (Cooren, in press; Czarniawska, 1997). As an organizing principle narrative also implicates the study of organizational identity in that every organization will struggle to tell and retell its own story, with some concern for coherence and while addressing multiple audiences. Some researchers believe that narrative is not just about storytelling; it is the basis on which events are structured in the first place—a view that is reminiscent of Burke's "dramaturgical" view (see, e.g., Robichaud, 1999; Taylor & Van Every, in press).

Critical Theory and Feminist Approaches

What is known as *critical theory* (in its strict sense referring to the Frankfurt school and in its broader sense referencing approaches that feature power, ideology, and undecidability in their analytic schemes) resembles structuration theory in its preoccupation with the bases of power, but it differs significantly from the latter in the emphasis it lays on the power of discourse to inform organizational worlds of experience. A principal source of inspiration for critical theory is the work of French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault (1984), who encourages us to take seriously the substantiality of language (hence his term *discursive formations*, which echoes the idea of geological formations). The constructions of language are not neutral; they have a history of emergence in social practices, and they engender a world of sense in which structures of domination and power are sanitized and naturalized. Take, for example, modern Western conceptions of the individual that stress autonomy, uniqueness, and agency. We should be looking for power not in the persons of a few leaders, or in the monopolization of resources

by a privileged few, Foucault argues, but in the ideology that made such distortions of power possible in the first place. Power is thus seen to be diffuse, inherent in the very language we speak. Deetz (1992) elaborates on the relevance of critical theories to the study of organizational communication.

Critical theory addresses themes that crosscut other preoccupations, including fields such as social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988, 1993; Kress & Hodge, 1979) and feminism (Buzanell, 1994; Clair, 1993; Mumby, 1987, 1988). Feminist scholars have made a great contribution to organizational communication research by demonstrating in their analyses of the unfolding of discourse in interactive situations how privilege and power are exercised and amplified to instantiate gender relations.

Not all the critical work on interaction, however, would normally be classified under this heading. Barker, Tompkins, and Cheney (Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) have shown how concertive control is exercised to discipline individual behavior even in so-called self-organizing groups. A preoccupation with interactive processes, and how they can produce bias, is shared by a large community of scholars who study phenomena such as conflict and negotiation (Putnam, 1989) and how discourse is framed (Clair, 1993; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Dialogue has become in fact an important focus of research in communication, just as it has become a popular term for organizational practitioners (Senge, 1990). The latest in the series of Alta conferences has been devoted to this topic.

This critical work has a larger significance in that it has brought to our attention the issue of how to achieve a democratic form of organization. Much of the traditional literature on organization assumed a basis in a kind of machine rationality, but, as Habermas (1984, 1987) points out, there is another rationality that a student of communicative action should bear in mind: the rationality of open and honest exchange and dialogue. It is this preoccupation that has led a number of researchers to explore the organizational dynamics of comparatively nonhierarchical models of organizing, such as cooperatives and collectives (Cheney, 1999; Glaser, 1994; Harrison, 1994). This work similarly brings to the fore international comparisons and has immensely enriched our understanding of what an organization actually is.

RESEARCH EMPHASES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: CURRENT CONCERNS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Problematics and Prospects

Mumby and Stohl (1996) identify four central "problematics" or key issues for the contemporary study of organizational communication that scholars in the discipline must address. First is the issue of *voice*, or the notion that organizational

communication researchers, rather than sharing managerial concerns and goals such as profit, are more typically concerned with organizations as "social collectivities that pose particularly complex communication issues" (p. 56). Voices exist partially outside of our unit of study and stand to inform important aspects of modern organizational life, as when we consider that certain stakeholding groups are being represented in administrative or managerial deliberations and decisions.

Another problematic is that of *rationality*, or the notion that modern organizations are bound to instrumentally (purposeful) and technically (predictable) rational goals such as efficiency. However, a tension exists due to coexistent, but often neglected, socially constructed individual goals that might not appear to be plainly instrumentally/technically rational. In this manner, communication phenomena in organizations such as negotiation or interpretation can be understood as incorporating fundamentally important (and rational) information about participants' definitions of the situation that might transcend narrowly rational views of organizational efficiency. For instance, Feldman and March (1981) made problematic the very notion of information in organizations by showing how the acts of collecting and presenting information themselves serve as important organizational messages.

Third is the problematic of *organization*. Beyond linear transmission of messages occurring primarily within the container of the organization, organizational communication scholars problematize the very notion of organization and organizing by emphasizing that communication behaviors serve to establish and affirm organizations continually via participants' interactions. In this view, organizations are constituted in their enactment and exist as individuals strive to make sense of them (Weick, 1979). In this respect, studies of organizational identities and the organizational properties of language (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996) come into view.

Finally, the *organization-environment relationship* is a problematic because boundaries between organizations and society are increasingly indistinct and permeable. For instance, pressures toward globalization highlight flexible and emergent communication networks (Monge & Contractor, 2000; Monge & Fulk, 1999), and in various ways organizations are increasingly viewed as sites for democratic forms of participation and decision making (Cheney et al., 1998; Stohl, 1995). In each instance, pressures from the external environment are indistinct from those within organizations—as can be seen, for instance, with the application of the concept of the "internal market" to all of an organization's activities (e.g., Halal, 1996).

These four problematics serve as useful frames for critiquing traditional organizational communication concerns and encourage the development of additional frames for critique. For example, although the socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) or assimilation (Jablin, 1987) perspective has resulted in a considerable body of scholarship, and Jablin and Krone (1994) and Bullis (1993) have urged a life-span perspective, most research has focused on newcomers' organizational experiences (for a notable exception, see Kramer, 1993). Importantly, the

work socialization/assimilation stage model has been challenged as privileging organizations' over individuals' interests (Cheney, 1987; Smith & Turner, 1995), valuing organizational "real jobs" and devaluing other forms of work (Clair, 1997), and limiting socialization foci to organization-centered dynamics and as a predetermined process (Giddens, 1979; McPhee, 1986). In many respects, the research on organizational socialization spans all four of Mumby and Stohl's (1996) problematics. Furthermore, although this corpus certainly deals with rationality, organization, environment, and (recently) voice, we would additionally frame socialization research as implicitly focused on *relationships*—another prospective problematic for organizational communication researchers. A further noteworthy feature of this research is that it has involved empirical, interpretive, and critical perspectives (Cheney, in press). Ultimately, we might reflect on how postmodern organizational socialization research would look.

Some New Theoretical Understandings of Communication and Organization

Even from our far-from-encyclopedia survey of some key moments and constructs in organizational communication (i.e., systems theory and interpretivism), it is clear that the field is characterized by exceptionally open boundaries. Although one can lament the resulting lack of a clear disciplinary identity (Mumby & Stohl, 1996), this permeability and the ready receptiveness to ideas, whatever their origin, may well be the mark of a new kind of discipline and a source of genuine vitality rather than simple eclecticism. In a world whose contours are increasingly global, what we have described will almost certainly become the pattern of all 21st-century disciplines concerned with social practice. What are some of the new influences just now being felt by organizational communication researchers? Again it is impossible to enumerate them all, but the following can be identified. We begin with a focus on theory and then turn to some topical areas.

Pursuing Elaboration and Refinement of Structural Analyses

The concept of structuration is the brainchild of a British sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1976, 1979, 1984). Many of its roots are shared by the interpretivism that we have described above, so it is hardly surprising that it would find a ready reception in communication circles (Browning & Beyer, 1998; Poole & McPhee, 1983; Poole et al., 1996; Riley, 1983; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998). Giddens's central idea is that both the structures of society and the day-to-day systems of people at work emerge out of the processes of interpretation of those caught up in activity. As they make sense of their own daily experiences by interpreting the flow of events retrospectively, people attribute meanings to what is happening that unconsciously reiterate the patterns of larger institutional forms. Society is continually being reconstituted and, as it is, structures of power are elaborated and confirmed, worlds of meaning are legitimated, and society's sanctions are enforced.

One of the central concerns of structural research in organizational communication has been the implementation of technology into organization. Here

computing is called variously *connectionism*, *subsymbolicism*, and *parallel distributed processing*. It makes the claim that knowledge is not restricted to forms that can be encoded into a symbolic medium such as language to become the basis of cognition (human or artificial). Instead, one of AI's aims is to demonstrate that there is another form of knowledge—subsymbolic knowledge—that is a property of the network of interaction rather than something possessed by any particular node within the network, human or otherwise. This somewhat abstract construction of an alternative form of knowledge has been given a much more recognizable face by Weick and Roberts (1993) and Hutchins (1995), whose careful analysis of teamwork on naval vessels points to the ability of collaborating members to respond successfully to complex environments employing a form of knowledge that they collectively generate, in interaction with technology, that no single one of them can be said to possess, or even to be fully aware of. Weick and Roberts refer to the “collective mind”; Hutchins prefers to call the phenomenon “distributed cognition.” Taylor and Van Every (in press) show that the assumption of distributed cognition is consistent with the work of some conversation analysts. The implications of this shift of perspective for organizational research remain to be explored, but it is clear that it entails a radical change in how we view organizational rationality and the role of management strategy.

Seeking the Further Examination of Discursive Fields In and Around Organizations

Consistent with moves to get beyond the container metaphor for organizational communication, a number of scholars have stretched analyses to include broad patterns in discourse that not only manifest themselves within organizations but also extend beyond the sites of organizations. Research by Deetz (1992) and Mumby (1997b) features the patterns of power that are represented within organizational contexts, such as meetings and narratives, but also are parallel to and influenced by broader patterns in the exercise of social power. Clair's (1997) essay on the colloquialism “Get a real job” is an excellent example of how organizational patterns of power are shaped to some extent by discourses that have a broader cultural life (in the “common sense” of the society). Holmer-Nadesan (1996) shows linkages between certain discourses of human resources management, such as personality testing, and wider cultural knowledge. May (1999) has recently examined the implicit cultural and political assumptions of employee-assistance and wellness programs of many contemporary organizations. Cheney (1998, 1999), McMillan and Cheney (1996), and Cheney and Zorn (1999) have considered how metaphors of the market and the customer/consumer are pervading organizational life today, thus drawing a connection between discourses of marketing and the internal affairs of organizations. Such studies remind us to pay greater attention to the diffusion of knowledge within and between organizations, considering especially how it is that certain ideas come to have the status

again the boundaries between communication and other closely related fields have proven to be fluid. One feature of both communication and noncommunication studies has been the conviction that the properties of technology are not fixed in the developer's laboratory. Technology is a malleable object whose definition is ultimately determined in the context of its use, where it is given meaning in the same way as other facets of experience, through retrospective interpretation. Some of the work studying the implementation of technology employs basically qualitative methods in a naturalistic field situation (Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski & Robey, 1991); some follows a more traditional approach of experimentalism, featuring operationalization of variables and a controlled laboratory situation (Poole & DeSanctis, 1992); some exhibits a mixed strategy (Barley, 1986).

Exploring the Potentials for Activity Theory and Translation Theory

Two bodies of theory closely associated with organizational communication but originating in other disciplines are now beginning to make their influence felt in the field; these are activity theory and translation theory. Activity theory is inspired by a Russian school of learning theory elaborated by Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev, but it is its reinterpretation by the Finnish scholar (and professor of communication at the University of California at San Diego) Engeström (1987, 1990; Engeström & Middleton, 1996) that has demonstrated its relevance to communication research. Activity theory emphasizes very strongly the material grounding of communication in a context of purposive work, within a physical situation, and mediated by technology. One of Engeström's notable contributions has been to show in his careful analysis of professional dialogue how the worldview of a certain community of discourse is made present in the voices of people belonging to that community as they carry out their tasks. Activity theory aims at uncovering the underlying tensions of overlapping discursive formations that presage and motivate organizational change.

Translation theory emerged out of the sociology of scientific knowledge as a way of explaining how certain views of reality come to dominate and eventually to be taken for granted (“black-boxed,” to use the colorful term applied by Latour, 1992). It aims to show how otherwise diverse interests come to be associated with each other to produce networks that take on the single voice of an actor. This work, known in organizational communication studies through the interpretations of Cooren (in press; Cooren & Taylor, 1997, 1999) and Robichaud (1999), thus touches on the essence of organization: its ability to “translate” collectively fragmented human endeavors into a single entity of action. It thus aims to reveal the bases of power as well as to reexamine the ontology of organization.

Understanding Artificial Intelligence and Its Possibilities

Recent developments in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) are now making their influence felt in organizational communication studies. The new concept of

of trends to which clusters of organizations, whole industries, or entire sectors appeal.

The discursive turn that has marked communication studies over the past decade is almost certainly due to expand as rhetorical, sociolinguistic, semiotic, critical discourse-analytic, and other language-centered perspectives become more a part of organizational communication's mainstream research agendas (see the review by Fairhurst & Putnam, 1999). In part, the trend is the result of innovative research by scholars already identified with the field (Mumby & Clair, 1997), but there have also emerged styles of analysis that reflect other disciplinary imperatives. One case in point is the work of Boden (1994), whose analysis is grounded in the tradition of conversation analysis but who has adapted it to the exigencies of organizational inquiry by introducing the notion of a "lamination" of conversations. This allows her to explore features of the flow of information in an organizational context that would otherwise remain unremarked. Another instance of innovation that began outside the field but is very much in the spirit of organizational communication work is the work of Star and Ruhleder (1996), who explore "boundary objects," or discourse themes among groups where each group holds an object in different significance even though all groups are co-oriented to it. Finally, Czarniawska's (1997) work on the role of narrative in and around organizations is highly sensitive to the dynamics of both internal and external organizational communication.

Coming to Grips With the Material as Well as the Symbolic Dimensions of Organizational Life

All theoretical perspectives, like all metaphors, have their blind spots or areas that they leave far in the background, largely outside of view (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). If interpretivism and the discursive turn have a major limitation, at least as they have been influential in organizational communication, it is found in their neglect of the biological and physical dimensions of organizational life. Recently, there has been a reaction against these "interpretive excesses" by some scholars, although thus far this movement can be seen largely outside the community of scholars who ally themselves under the rubric of *organizational communication*. For example, Cloud's (1994) work in rhetorical criticism is helpful in articulating the material constraints on discourse production, as when she considers the resource limits for persuasive campaigns conducted by today's labor unions in the face of still-strong antiunion corporate postures. And Aune's (1997) rhetorical-critical investigations have drawn greater attention to both the material and the symbolic aspects of economic forces. Finally, Ballard and Seibold (1999) have explored both objective and subjective dimensions of time as they relate to our understandings of organizational communication, and sociologist Russell (1996) has enjoined organizational communication scholars to pay closer attention to the *nature of work activities themselves*—the actual types of work being done—as they examine messages, interactions, networks, and discourses.

Returning to the Sociological Roots of Organizational Analysis While Transforming Its Central Concepts With Insights From Communication Studies

Through most of its history, organizational communication research has offered relatively little insight into broader institutional concerns: issues that transcend the domains of distinct organizations and speak to broad social processes and problems (see Euske & Roberts, 1987). As a number of trends mentioned above reveal, that is beginning to change. Although institution-level concerns have figured more prominently in sociology (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), what can organizational communication researchers say about organizational mimicry (trend setting and trend following) or cross-fertilization (across sectors—as when religious organizations begin to look like businesses and businesses take on characteristics and functions formerly ascribed to religious institutions), or the diffusion of what counts as practical "managerial knowledge"? In this way, organizational communication scholars can return to the societywide concerns that motivated Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and other founders of organizational theory. Furthermore, a distinctly communicative approach to these traditionally sociological preoccupations could help explain the ironies, twists, and turns in the transformation of symbols and organizations that have been missing in accounts of organizations that have often taken social structures for granted.

Seeing Groups as Crucial "Mediating Structures" in Organizational Communication

Organizational groups invite greater attention from communication researchers for theoretical, empirical, and practical reasons (Poole, 1998; Seibold, 1998; Weick, 1979). Theoretically, groups are at the nexus of organizational interaction and structure. Members' groups have pervasive effects that channel individual agency yet mediate larger organizational structures in processes that constrain and condition individuals. Empirically, and owing to dynamics endemic to task demands and jurisdiction, resource distribution and competition, temporal constraints on performance, multiple levels of operation across groups and organizations (Lammers & Krikorian, 1997), multiparty/multimotive interactions, relational intricacies and power structures, and coordinating/collaborative needs challenge researchers to untangle the empirical complexities of organizational groups. Not only do organizational groups abound (e.g., work groups, cross-functional teams, short-term project groups, ad hoc task forces, perennial agenda committees, support and adjudicating groups, executive/administrative teams, quality and oversight groups—not to mention groups as emergent organizations), but group-based organizational structures and activities are becoming increasingly prevalent for philosophical, competitive, and political reasons (Seibold & Shea, 2000). Notwithstanding efforts to apply strong theoretical frameworks to organizational groups (Barker & Cheney, 1994; Poole et al., 1996; Putnam & Stohl, 1996), groups remain much understudied by organizational communication

researchers. Allen et al. (1993) identified only 41 (4.6%) group-related studies among the 889 organizational communication pieces appearing between 1980 and 1991. Cragan and Wright (1990) found that only 9 (11%) of 72 empirical investigations (among a total of 96 articles on group communication published in communication journals during the 1980s) studied groups in organizational settings. After surveying what we estimate to be more than 3,000 articles published in 88 social science journals between 1993 and 1995, Greenbaum and Query (1999) found 311 articles relevant to the subject of organizational work group behavior. Only 27% were natural work group studies, and only 55 were studies of communication in natural work groups. Much more work needs to be done.

Taking Seriously the Adoption of Diverse Perspectives

Organizational communication is on the brink of taking diversity seriously, not only within its traditional domain of North America but around the world. Reaching out to examine the full potential for feminist, multicultural, and multinational perspectives is a worthy pursuit for ethical reasons alone. But this intellectual and practical expansion of the discipline also stands to challenge many of our accustomed ways of thinking about communication and organization as well as to introduce some wholly new ideas. A genuine commitment to this kind of theoretical diversity means not so much reinterpreting newly encountered theoretical discourses—such as feminist analyses of bureaucracy (Ferguson, 1984) or Chinese understandings of socialization at work (Krone, Chen, Sloan, & Gallant, 1997)—in terms of the usual ways of thinking, but seeing what it really means to adopt another point of view on some of our most cherished constructs. Munshi (1999), for example, is developing a thorough critique of the literature on “diversity management” (inside and outside of organizational communication circles), revealing its strong instrumental and neocolonialist biases. Even in supposedly humanistic and sensitive accounts of diversity management and multiculturalism in organizations, most writers are insisting on conformity by the so-called diverse groups rather than taking diverse influences seriously. In the coming years, we should expect studies emanating from a variety of sources that challenge some of our most fundamental notions of rationality, organizational structure, decision making, and relationships.

Emerging and New Topics in Organizational Communication Research

Having considered a number of recent and emerging theoretical developments in organizational communication, we now turn to a brief listing of topics to be explored. Where the topics are familiar, we suggest new avenues of exploration. Where they are new, we simply try to introduce them to organizational communication scholars.

What Count as Organizations: New and Nonmainstream Organizational Forms

Several organizational forms stand in contrast to traditional, vertically integrated organizations. Global, network, and virtual organizations, formed on the basis of partnerships, joint ventures, alliances, flexible manufacturing, and the outsourcing of services, rely heavily on advanced communication and information technologies that enable organizational members to coordinate their actions across space and time (Heckscher, 1994; Monge & Fulk, 1999; Nohria & Berkley, 1994; Powell, 1990; Stohl, 2000). Because these organizational forms emphasize multiparty cooperative work, nonproximate work teams, and strong links between activities and individuals across organizational boundaries, communication processes assume a critical role in our attempts to understand them. Further, such interorganizational and quasi-organizational developments make problematic customary notions of collaboration and competition (Golden, 1993).

Communication researchers will also be challenged to expand the variety of places we “find” organizing and organization. Although we have begun to focus beyond traditional sites (North American corporations and governmental organizations) and on nonprofits, cooperatives, and collectives, the scope of organizational scholarship can undoubtedly widen. Stohl (1993b) outlines three types of international organizations (international governmental organizations such as the United Nations, international nongovernmental organizations such as Amnesty International, and multinational corporations), all of which invite study in the face of globalization. Trujillo (1999) raises the important point that nonmainstream organizations and groups have received little attention from organizational communication scholars. Notwithstanding many analyses in Frey’s (1994) edited volume on group communication, we have not seen many studies of labor unions and nonprofit agencies, let alone neighborhood associations, community movements, and street gangs.

Technology, Organizations, and Society

The role of technology is crucial in many issues confronted by contemporary organizational communication scholars, and, because it is interwoven so thoroughly into organizational practice, it cannot be meaningfully separated from the organizational contexts in which it is used. Perspectives such as structural accounts of technology acknowledge this mutual causality of structure and action, and technology’s role in the relation (Jackson, 1996; Markus & Robey, 1988; Orlikowski, 1992; Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). As Barley (1986) has convincingly demonstrated, technologies in effect offer “occasions for structuring” that serve to highlight their “second-level” effects over more narrow and intended ones (see Sproull & Kiesler, 1991, pp. 1-17). The implication for organizational communication researchers is that technology should be considered a fundamental part of organizational communication phenomena, and studies of technology should explicitly consider the role of organizational context (rather than viewing technol-

ogy as a separate area of study). In this regard, compelling work is being produced at the group (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1994, pp. 7-31), organizational (Fulk, 1993), and interorganizational (Monge et al., 1998) levels. Related research treats technology as a patterned discourse that is seen to shape interaction; indeed, from this broad perspective, frameworks for gathering organizational knowledge, like marketing, are heuristically seen as technologies (Christensen, 1999).

As a consequence, although technological innovation has occasionally been the topic of organizational communication studies, there is now an urgent need to focus on the implications of the transformations that accompany the implementation of new technologies. To this end, we can learn from some of the excellent field studies of organizational work that have been conducted over the past decade (e.g., Trujillo, 1992). This work has once again reiterated the remarkable complexity of situated activities and the complex interaction of human and technological agents, but it has also pointed to the strikingly different images of how to organize that characterize, on the one hand, conventional management thinking and, on the other, the perspective of situated action (Suchman, 1987, 1996). Although such conflicts of imagery are at least as old as the famous Hawthorne studies of 1927-1932, they take on a singular relevance in the present era. The result is the emergence in recent organizational communication studies of cutting-edge research into dispersed organizations (Monge et al., 1998), fluid forms of organization that are not so much networks as "knotworks" (Engeström, Engeström, & Vähäaho, 1999; Krikorian, Taylor, & Harms, 1998), and self-organizing forms of association that are in large part enabled through new communication technologies (Contractor, 1994; Corman, 1997). This is work we can expect to see expand very rapidly as the implications of the Internet's spectacular success are felt (Flanagin, Farinola, & Metzger, in press; Flanagin & Metzger, in press).

Groups and/in Organizations

In light of technological, global, and economic forces shaping organizations today, a focus on group-based structures and processes seems imperative (Poole, 1998). Consider global, virtual, or networked organizations characterized by multiparty cooperative work, nonproximate work teams, and strong links between activities and individuals across organizational boundaries (Davidow & Malone, 1992; Miles & Snow, 1986; Nohria & Berkley, 1994; Powell, 1990). Based on interactions in network (versus more traditional, vertically integrated) organizations, DeSanctis and Poole (1997), identify potential changes in team-based structures, processes, and social identities. They propose that teamwork may undergo such changes as increasingly heterogeneous team membership, shifts in team-based social identification, and less reliance on formal procedures and more on information-sharing technologies. These changes suggest that core organizational communication issues such as organizational identification, team commitment, communication satisfaction, and communicative competence may become problematic, demanding reinterpretation. In turn, this suggests specific communi-

cation phenomena that researchers might examine in order to understand more fully changes such as those that might occur in (inter)organizational teamwork. For instance, the study of discourse at the team and organizational levels can help us to make sense of diverse, multicultural teams and organizations; researchers can examine symbols in order to assess degrees of commonality or meaningful differences among members of different cultures; and we can explore cross-team interaction networks as a means of examining factors that enhance or inhibit information sharing.

Leadership: Old and New

As suggested by the prevalence of team-based organization and organizational restructuring noted above, new conceptions of leadership are gaining additional significance. Leadership research is now moving beyond even the popular transformational model (Burns, 1978) to consider what it means when leadership is emergent, negotiated, shared, and facilitative in nature. In management studies, Manz and Sims (1984) have written extensively about the dilemmas of the "unleader." And within communication studies, scholars such as Barker (1993), Fairhurst (2000), Seibold (1995), and Zorn and Thompson (in press) have explored the micro-level communicative aspects of leadership within the team context. From a critical standpoint, of course, it is important to consider the extent to which the reframing of leadership in managerial movements is actually as liberating as it sounds.

Organizing for and Talking About Change

Organizational change and change-oriented persuasion represent important new topics for organizational communication scholars. Lewis and Seibold (1998) delineate the phases of organizational change in explicitly communication-oriented terms: They identify the two broad categories of interaction surrounding implementation (including information sharing, vision and motivation, social support, and evaluation/feedback) and communication-related structures (reward, participation, and role). To some degree, traditional studies of innovation and innovation diffusion (see especially Rogers, 1995, pp. 252-280; but see also Albrecht & Hall, 1981; Bach, 1989) have been supplanted by a focus on change, not because such traditional studies fail to provide continued insight but because of the broad rhetoric of change sweeping organizations today (Zorn, Christensen, & Cheney, 1999). A social critic outside our discipline, Sennett (1998), has called attention to the limitations of our obsession with change in organizations and urges a revaluating of continuity, stability, and loyalty. As with a number of other topics we discuss here, change can thus be conceptualized on several different levels for message analysis—from the distinct change program or organizational innovation to a discourse cohering more or less around a central term or symbol.

We also propose resistance to change as an important area of investigation. Here we refer to both organized (e.g., through labor unions and professional associations) and unorganized attempts to oppose, undermine, or modify managerially driven programs of organizational change. However, so far the topic of resistance has been little explored by organizational communication scholars (for exceptions, see Markham, 1996; Mumby, 1997b; in sociology, see Graham, 1995; in management, see Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994). Paradoxically, new forms of resistance to organizational programs may develop as employees are reconfigured as internal "customers" and "suppliers": They may make new demands for participation at work (Cheney, 1999).

New Forms of Network Research

Stemming from a diverse set of concerns with social structure (Bateson, 1972; Giddens, 1976; Homans, 1958; Weber, 1947), network perspectives have flourished under equally diverse positional, relational, and cultural traditions (for an in-depth discussion, see Monge & Eisenberg, 1987). Positional views emphasize the patterns of relations among formally defined positions (in the group, organization, or society). In this view, exchange patterns are largely dictated by the responsibilities that are incumbent on the individual occupying a specific position or role. Relational network perspectives, by contrast, focus on the emergent nature of association among entities (individuals, groups, or organizations) and the resultant networks of relations that are formed. Research in the cultural tradition extends this concern by exploring the establishment, transmission, and reproduction of meaning as facilitated by networks among individuals. Importantly, recent work (Monge & Contractor, 2000) has responded to a call for greater theoretical specificity and rigor (Salancik, 1995), beyond these metatheoretical traditions.

Network perspectives currently enjoy tremendous vitality and growth in organizational communication research. Stohl (1995) demonstrates that multiple, overlapping, and interconnected relationships create and sustain contemporary organizational life. Network theory and analysis have been invoked to examine common meaning in semantic networks (Fiol, 1989; Monge & Eisenberg, 1987; Rice & Danowski, 1993; Stohl, 1993a), cognitive conceptualizations of organizational structures (Heald et al., 1998; Krackhardt, 1987), social influence among individuals (Marsden & Friedkin, 1994; Rice, 1993), the diffusion of innovations (Rice, Grant, Schmitz, & Torbin, 1990; Valente, 1995, 1996), and organizational commitment and turnover (Eisenberg, Monge, & Miller, 1984; Feeley & Barnett, 1996). Network perspectives in organizational communication include interpersonal (Liedka, 1991), intraorganizational (Krackhardt & Brass, 1994), interorganizational (Grandori & Soda, 1995; Mizuchi & Galaskiewicz, 1994; Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996), and multilevel (Seabright, Levinthal, & Fichman, 1992) analyses.

Finally, there is developing work on community-based networks. In recent years, several studies of practical aspects of networking in different cities have appeared. What is especially interesting about these cases is that they rely on both computer-mediated communication and face-to-face interaction. Rogers and his colleagues (e.g., Schmitz, Rogers, Phillips, & Paschal, 1993) have analyzed the highly successful Santa Monica, California, Public Electronic Network (PEN), which was established to promote both knowledge sharing and intergroup interaction. Contractor and his colleagues (1998) have developed a similar system in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, based on an elaboration of network methodology that links people not only through their own shared information but also through mediating individuals and groups.

Work and Nonwork Domains

Just as changes in society have made organizational boundaries more fluid, so they make for reconfigurations of relationships at work and in the home. The area of study concerned with work and nonwork domains has enjoyed a great revival in recent years in sociology, owing in large part to the well-known work of Hochschild (1983, 1989). Again, working largely within the container metaphor, organizational communication scholars have until recently generally ignored the ways relationships at work relate to those outside of work. But trends such as telecommuting, open-ended work hours for many professions, threats to the idea of a lifelong career, and the growth of wellness programs at work challenge us to examine patterns of organizing activities at home and in public settings outside of places of employment. This is a case where longitudinal and multimethod studies of interaction would allow organizational communication scholars to make important practical as well theoretical contributions.

Ethics

As Redding (1996) noted several years ago, ethics suffers from neglect in organizational communication research and consulting. This is not to say that most organizational communication scholars are without ethical concerns; rather, they have not generally pushed those ideals to the forefront of their analyses and writing. This is certainly evident in most organizational communication textbooks, which tend to give only passing attention to ethical issues.

Here we would argue for the examination of ethics in organizational communication on two broad levels: first, the ethical dimensions of communication-related functions, such as the dimensions of dissent in organizations (Kassing & Avigis, 1999; Mattson & Buzzanell, 1999); second, the construction of presumably ethical and α -ethical or nonethically relevant "spaces" through the invocation of concepts such as "just business" (Cheney, 1998, 1999). In other words, we urge organizational communication scholars to analyze both the ethical dimensions of a

problem and the very ways that discourses about ethics and ethical practices in organizations are delineated.

The Local and the Global

Social, economic, technological, and political developments are producing organizational alternatives beyond just the traditional sectors of public, private, and so-called independent while also cutting across industries and nations (Poole, 1997). Consequently, organizational communication should continue a trend toward the study of more and different types of organizations that span nationalities, functional domains, and organizational types (Stohl, 1993b). Furthermore, exigencies from outside the organization demand a rethinking of organizational practices with a simultaneous concern for the local and the global. For instance, Stohl (2000) notes how members of global organizations must manage environmental, technological, and social pressures to become more similar to organizational members from cultures other than their own while also maintaining their own distinct cultural identities. Missteps in this complex identity management can result in disastrous organizational outcomes (Seelye & Seelye-James, 1995).

Increasingly, organizational communication scholarship is turning to case studies that implicate a range of processes related to globalization (which is admittedly and importantly a polysemic term). There are studies on international business negotiations, in which the insights of intercultural communication are crucial to the examination of both the microinteractional and macrocontextual features of interorganizational relations. There are studies of multicultural influences within both "home-based" and transplanted multinational corporations, emphasizing multiple levels of understanding of "organizational culture" (Smircich & Calás, 1987). Studies of differences among national and cultural interpretations of key concepts such as "employee participation" have been conducted within the European Union (e.g., Stohl, 1993a). Studies comparing employee relations and organizational rationality in North America and Latin America have appeared, and there have been case studies of global market and related political pressures on long-standing organizational traditions in the public sector of Sweden (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994), of private worker-owned cooperatives in the Basque Provinces of Spain (Cheney, 1999), and of indigenous empowerment movements in Canada (Cooren & Taylor, 2000), Bangladesh (Auwal, 1999; Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995), and India (Kandath, Papa, & Singhal, 1999; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 1999). The studies in India and Bangladesh bring organizational communication scholarship into direct contact with issues of international development while relating to specific questions of local empowerment, feminism, and values-based organizations.

Societal changes of various types pose great challenges for the study of contemporary organizations, but we think communication researchers are well positioned to address issues such as those mentioned here (see also Mumby & Stohl, 1996; Putnam, 1998). We are hopeful that in the coming years the field of organizational

communication will offer some of the most intriguing explanations, interpretations, and critiques found in any area of social inquiry.

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