



Communication Study in the 20th Century : Milestones and Trends

Sid Terason*

Abstract

The study of communication has been evolving since the early 20th century. The various definitions given by the communication scholars reveal the combination of science and humanism. In the United States, the discipline of communication originated in rhetorics. Then, prior to World War II, there emerged a trend in communication research which focused on the effect of communication. After the War, empirical studies of communication have been widely conducted. The social turbulence during the mid-century caused students to increasingly focus their study on interpersonal communication. European critical theory later influenced the communication concept in the US. From the 70s on, scholars sought for a universal theory to explain communication, believing in Kuhn's idea that advocates a central theory for any science. Presently, communication still lacks cohesion among sub-fields. Also, we should not use scientific standards to analyze humanistic work and vice versa.

Key words : Communication theory, communication concept, the communication discipline, the study of communication in the US.

Since the early 1900s, the conceptualization of communication attracted many scholars away from other disciplines, such as social sciences and humanities, into the field of communication. For decades thereafter, these scholars have conducted empirical studies both in an attempt to understand and explain the

communication process as well as to create workable theories about it.

Communication scholars have assiduously attempted to define the word *communication* since the early 1950s. As evidence, Dance & Larson (1976) compiled 126 definitions in *The Functions of Human Communication: A Theoretical Approach*.

Griffin (2002) put it in perspective by noting that, as the concept of communication is difficult to capture, most definitions probably say more about the author than they do about the nature of communication.

Theorists gave diverse definitions according to their approach to their specific scholarship. For example,

* Suan Dusit Rajabhat University



Shannon, a scientific scholar, viewed communication objectively and in a generalized manner as “the transmission and reception of information.” By contrast, I. A. Richards, a humanist philosopher, posited that communication is “the generation of meaning.” This observation recognized the individual differences in the communication process. Although not contradictory, both definitions failed to address the concerns that other theorists had in mind.

In light of recognizing that inquiry into communication combined both scientific and humanistic methods, Frey et al (2002) defined communication as “the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning.” This definition gave no credence to a particular stance but focused instead on depicting the essence of the communication process. By this definition, communication was looked upon as intentional despite its often accidental results. Rather uniquely, it embraced the concerns of the arts and science. It welcomed the study of both verbal and nonverbal messages and their meanings or relationships.

History tells us who we have been and thereby helps us understand who we are. As an overview of the history of communication study, a discussion of its significant periods in the 20th century is presented below.

Early Rhetoric (1900 - 1950)

Early in the previous century,

communication was not yet established as a discipline all to itself. In a number of US universities, the closest thing to communication studies were speech courses taught by professors from the English department. A course in speech, then, did not have a status equal to one in literature. During these early years, speech departments offered courses that gave practical advice to those trying to influence audiences through public address, oral interpretation of literature, radio broadcasts, drama, debate, and roundtable discussions. Speech teachers drew on Greek and Roman wisdom such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian for instruction in public address.

In 1914, some speech scholars broke away from the National Council of Teachers of English and formed the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking.¹ In order to garner respect for themselves, NAATPS emphasized that speech professionals should endeavor to gain “a scientific frame of mind” and to “undertake scientific investigation” to gain respectability in academia. It was not until 1935 that departments of speech were created in over 200 American colleges. The communication field did not intrinsically take on the scientific method until after World War II.

Wichelns (1925) established the neo-Aristotelian method of rhetorical criticism at Cornell. He stressed rhetoric as a way to communicate

with audiences with the resulting emphasis on effect, not beauty like literature. He espoused the use of Aristotle’s categories of logical, emotional, and ethical appeals to evaluate persuasive discourse. This new method of speech criticism dominated the field for the next few decades. However, for most speech teachers, rhetoric was an art and thus did not correlate well with the scientific quantitative study of public address.

Media Effects (1930 - 1960)

Before World War II, leading social scientists scientifically examined media effects, and called the inquiry communication research. They looked upon mass communication media like radio, television, etc. as forms of entertainment rather than areas worthy of study. With a pressing need to win support for the war effort, social scientists took a behavioral approach to study the effects of persuasive messages on mass audiences. As early as 1927, a political scientist named Lasswell investigated the powerful effects of media, especially in propaganda, and, in 1948, proposed a five-question model with a breakdown of five components: Who says what through which channel, to whom, with what effect. In 1942, Carl Hovland, a psychologist, conducted an experimental study on the effects of media (training films, in this case) on attitude change. In 1948, Paul

¹ Ironically the abbreviation NAATPS was found hard to pronounce. The organization later changed its name to the Speech Association of America (SAA).



Lazarsfeld, a sociologist, studied voting decisions and found that interpersonal contact was more powerful than mass media in influencing voting decisions.

In 1959, Berelson, a University of Chicago social scientist, was dismayed at the state of communication research, having observed a decline in scholars publishing their research. In fact, a scholar like Schramm contributed to the field in a number of ways by adding communication to the rank of the five other social sciences; namely, psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and anthropology, thereby elevating communication to an equal status. Also, in 1943, Schramm founded the first doctoral program in mass communication at University of Iowa. Three years later, he established the Bureau of Audience Research, patterned after Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia. Schramm was therefore regarded as pioneer in the empirical study of communication. The rhetorical arts and behavioral sciences were for the first time blended together as were interpersonal and mass communication studies by Schramm and his students. From that point forward, Schramm's work essentially pushed the study of speech into adopting a scientific approach.

Empiricism (1950 - 1970)

In the 1950s, social science scholars, equipped with skepticism,

challenged scientifically the ancient rhetorical principles that claimed persuasive discourse derived from ethic and logic; in other words, an ethical speaker with a logical argument. For instance, according to Aristotle, ethos constituted a speaker's intelligence, character, and goodwill toward the audience, but empirical studies revealed goodwill was part of character.

In 1950 International Communication Association (ICA) was founded in opposition to the humanities-based Speech Association of America (SAA). Their mission was to conduct science-based research different from the textual analysis done by rhetoricians. Berlo (1960) in his famous textbook, *Process of Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, reduced Shannon & Weaver's model to constitute four components: Source, Message, Channel, and Receiver. The SMCR model presented a new way to look at the communication process.

The researchers continued to gather ideas and world views from other disciplines, especially social psychology. In 1969, the SAA changed its name to the Speech Communication Association (SCA). This new name underscored the attempted dominance of the scientific approach towards the speech discipline. Since the early 1960s, speech departments started to adopt the term *communica-*

tion in their title.

Interpersonal Communication (1960 - 1970)

The Sixties was a time of great social and political upheaval in the US, ranging from domestic riots to an overseas war, and from sexual revolution to drug experimentation, a generation influenced by the Beatles and the Beat.² The unrest throughout the country was reflected in departments of speech and communication. Humanist scholars were disturbed by the nonverbal, non-artistic methods used by demonstrators. The focus of study in speech and communication was shifted from mass communication to interpersonal communication.

In the early 1960s, speech study focused on interpretation, argumentation, persuasion, message organization, public address, etc. By 1970, public speaking was replaced by interpersonal communication as a required course. Speech teachers no longer taught public speaking but turned to dyadic interactions, trust building, self-disclosure, nonverbal communication, conflict resolution, and other interpersonal issues and as well as sensitivity training or humanistic psychology.

According to Griffin (2002), society sanctioned individualism, and ignored corporate responsibility or conscious attempts to change other people's behavior. Scholars valued relationships more than message

² The unconventional movement that stressed nonconformity to social and cultural mores in the 50s. The group was essentially represented by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Neal Cassady.



content. Communication ethics meant being true to your communication partner; rather than being truthful. Students increasingly gravitated towards majoring in interpersonal and media communication, rather than oral interpretation, public address, etc. Although empiricism was much expected, there remained sustained interest in, and the development of, new methods in rhetorical analysis. Moreover, voice and drama broke away to form their own departments.

The New Rhetorics (1965 - 1980)

In 1965, the historical-critical Aristotelian analysis of message arguments and figures of speech was suggested in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

The sole method of textual analysis placed rhetoricians outside of the mainstream of the discipline. However, Edward Black's book *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study of Method* voiced opposing views of traditional rhetorical scholarship by proposing multiple ways to conduct speech analysis. Aristotle's categories of logos, pathos, and ethos continued to be used to analyze a message, the speaker, and the audience. New approaches in rhetorics came to prominence soon after that.

Many humanists did not agree with the non-artistic, unsubtle method of demonstrations to effect persuasion. Scholars thus looked more closely at the nonverbal aspects of communication. Communication

media, once regarded as entertainment, was so significant in shaping culture that McLuhan made the assertion, "The medium is the message." This stirred renewed investigation amongst communications students across the country.

European theorists were critical of American social scientists, accusing them of serving those in power. The European thinking, with its emphasis on communication and culture, began to influence U.S. scholars by the end of 1970s.

A Universal Model (1970 - 1980)

The amount of new findings in communication from the last two decades had been far from satisfactory. Thus, communication empiricists thought there was a need for a single grand theory on which their research could be based. Each group examined the variables important to them. This created sub-disciplines within a discipline; for example, speech anxiety within rhetoric, leadership within group communication, media violence within mass communication, source credibility within persuasion, and self-esteem, self-disclosure, trust, nonverbal signals, conflict resolution, and so on in the area of interpersonal communication.

Thomas Kuhn (1996)³ argued that "a universal paradigm or model is the mark of a mature science." Communication professors, aware that the field was lacking in a universal paradigm, hunted for a unifying theory

or approach that would guarantee academic respectability as in other fields such as psychology or physics. So, throughout the decade of the 1970s, empiricists pursued the dream of a universally accepted communication model.

In 1970s scholars proposed a plethora of schematic models of communication. These came in all shapes and forms with each more convoluted than the one before. But no single model was accepted as the paradigm of the communication process. In 1977, scholars championed three types of communication theory-laws, rules, and systems. Laws were the goal of the scientific approach; rules were that of humanism. Systems theorists viewed a communication event as a system of interdependent and interacting parts and regarded the communication event as greater than its individual communicator. This decade's debates failed to coalesce on a universal model of communication; but, over time, interest waned and scholars saw no using a single paradigm.

Fragmentation (1980 - Present)

Since 1983, the field had a mixture of creative energy and stressful agitation. Communication departments across the US offered new courses and majors that were attractive to students. American students began to take more courses in public relations, advertising, negotiation, and leadership; courses in mass and interpersonal communica-

³ Kuhn, the philosopher of science, made this remark in this landmark book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which was translated into Thai by Siriphen Piriya-jitakonkij in 2001.



tion were not as popular as in the past. Simultaneously, researchers sought to keep pace with an expanding field. As a result, students can now find research summaries in handbooks of interpersonal communication, organizational communication, and communication science, or consult entries in the four-volume *Encyclopedia of Communications*⁴. Gleaned from articles from communication-related journals, Griffin (2002) suggested trends in communication study as follows:

1. More interest in cultural studies and critical theory.
2. Increasing use of ethnography. For example, media analysts are more interested in interpreting message content than analyzing it.
3. Attempts to understand the cognitive processes in communication that guide communication behavior.
4. While persuasion and group behavior were topics of the past, today's focus is on interpersonal relationships.
5. Diverse interests and research agendas within the field of communication.

At present, the study of communication needs to be more

unified and focused. The scholastic community needs to seek self-identity. Oftentimes, communication majors take a cafeteria-style learning approach-without mastering a common core of knowledge. The study of communication branched out to different subfields and the field evolved into a mixture of the humanities and sciences. However, the study of theory and research takes one approach or the other but seldom blends the two. The disagreement between behavioral scientists and rhetoricians contributes to fragmentation in the field. Even though communication research and rhetorical study markedly differ, each still holds an important place within our discipline. We must use our judgment in selecting an appropriate approach to evaluate an empirical or a rhetorical theory.

References

Berlo, D. (1960). *Process of communication: An introduction to theory and practice*. New York: Thomson Learning.

Dance, F., & Larson, C. (1976). *The functions of human communication: A theoretical approach*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Delia, J. (1987). Communication research: A history. In C. Berger & S. Chaffee (Eds.), *Handbook of communication science* (pp. 20-98). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Frey, L. R., Botan, C. H., & Kreps, G. L. (2002). *Investigating communication: An introduction to research method* (2nd ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon.

Griffin, E. (2002). *A first look at communication theory* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Knapp, M., Miller, G., & Fudge, K. (1994). Background and current trends in the study of interpersonal communication. In M. Knapp, & G. Miller (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (pp. 7-24). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Robinson, G. (1988). *Here be dragons: Problems in charting the U.S. history of communication studies*. *Communication*, 10, 97-119.

Rogers, E. (1994). *A history of communication study*. New York: Free Press.

Rowland, W. (1988). *Recreating the past: Dilemmas in rewriting the history of communication research*. *Communication*, 10, 121-140.

Wood, J. (2004). *Communication theories in action: An introduction* (3th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

⁴ A widely regarded authority in the field of communication - *International Encyclopedia of Communications* - Compiled in 1989 by Barnouw, Gerbner, Schramm, et al.





บทคัดย่อ การศึกษาวิชาการสื่อสารในศตวรรษที่ ๒๐ : เหตุการณ์สำคัญและแนวโน้ม
สิทธิ อีรสรณ์

การศึกษาทางการสื่อสารมีวิวัฒนาการมาตั้งแต่ช่วงต้นศตวรรษที่ ๒๐ ซึ่งเมื่อสังเกตจากคำนิยามที่หลากหลาย โดยนักวิชาการการสื่อสารเราจะเห็นว่าศาสตร์นี้มีวิถีศึกษาที่ผสมผสานความเป็นวิทยาศาสตร์และความเป็นมนุษยศาสตร์ การเรียนการสอนทางสื่อสารในสหรัฐอเมริกาเริ่มจากวิชาวาทวิทยา ต่อมาช่วงก่อนสงครามโลกครั้งที่ ๒ นักวิชาการก็เริ่มมีการวิจัยการสื่อสาร โดยเน้นที่ผลกระทบของสื่อเป็นครั้งแรก หลังสงคราม การศึกษาเชิงประจักษ์ในเรื่องการสื่อสารได้รับความนิยมนมากยิ่งขึ้น ท่ามกลางความยุ่งเหยิงทางสังคมในสหรัฐอเมริกาในช่วงทศวรรษที่ ๖๐ นักศึกษาสนใจศึกษาเรื่องการสื่อสารระหว่างบุคคลมากขึ้น จากนั้น ทฤษฎีเชิงวิพากษ์จากยุโรปเข้ามามีอิทธิพลต่อแนวคิดของการสื่อสารในสหรัฐอเมริกา จนถึงช่วงทศวรรษที่ ๗๐ นักวิชาการพยายามค้นหาทฤษฎีสากลเพื่ออธิบายการสื่อสารตามที่คูห์นเชื่อว่าศาสตร์ที่สมบูรณ์ต้องมีทฤษฎีกลาง ปัจจุบันนี้ วิชาการสื่อสารยังคงขาดสัมพันธภาพ ระหว่างสาขาย่อยต่าง ๆ และเราไม่ควรใช้แนวทางวิทยาศาสตร์วิเคราะห์งานที่มีความเป็นมนุษยศาสตร์อันใด เราไม่ควรใช้เกณฑ์ทางมนุษยศาสตร์ตัดสินงานทางวิทยาศาสตร์อันนั้น

คำสำคัญ : ทฤษฎีการสื่อสาร, แนวคิดการสื่อสาร, วิชาการสื่อสาร, การศึกษาวิชาสื่อสารในสหรัฐอเมริกา