

Chapter 1

Forty Years of Organizational Communication

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ABSTRACT

This essay begins with a description of the emergence of organizational communication as a discipline. The authors explain how Murray's notion of a discipline framed a 1976 organizational communication conference and two consequent conferences held twenty years apart. Because all three conferences featured the same distinctive way to present material, the conferences provided a unique opportunity to track the development of the discipline. This chapter provides a representative review of the organizational communication literature over 40 years as an historical context. This chapter begins by explaining Murray's categories, and the authors describe 40 year trends in the literature within each category. The authors end the chapter by highlighting the challenges and opportunities ahead.

INTRODUCTION

The surest way to create confusion at an anthropology conference is to ask anthropologists to define “culture” (Agar, 1994), but this challenge has been the lore of all applied fields such as management, and communication conferences as well. However, today, some are questioning the validity of pure research, and this includes challenges to the future of mathematics research or mathematics departments (Devlin, 2013). Furthermore, the pace of innovations appears to have slowed, and some have questioned if this signals the limits of human thinking (McMillan, 2015). There have been doubts about the legitimacy of many academic and research enterprises.

Organizational communication is a discipline that has its own history of legitimization (see Feldner & D’Urso, 2010). By 1968, the term, “organizational communication” had emerged as the more dominant term to characterize what others had called “industrial communication”, “business speech”, or “business communication” (Redding, 1985), and the newly formed International Communication Association (ICA)

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designated one of its four original divisions as organizational communication (Barbour, 2015). About the same time, scholars developed the first reviews of organizational communication research (Redding, 1972; Tompkins, 1967), and started the *Organizational Communication Abstract* series (Greenbaum, 1975). The emergence of a prominent label and the development of terms to review and arrange research and practice provided labels and definitions, and the affiliation with a professional association meant that scholars and consultants would regularly participate in ceremonies (e.g., conferences). Managing definitions and participating in ritual behaviors are two features necessary to achieve legitimization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

In 1976, Texas State University hosted “Organizational Communication as a Discipline”, the first of three conferences about organizational communication. Murray (1972) conceived of a discipline as a unified body of knowledge having (1) a specified domain, (2) a theoretical foundation, (3) various methods of research, (4) a system of application, and (5) a method of criticism or evaluation, and he argued that communication was not simply about teaching skills, but a complete discipline. The 1976 conference represented a convergence around using some traditional ideas, organizing thinking around common constructs, and employing behavioral methods, but the papers also included emerging ideas about the changing nature of organizations, research, and applications. The need to obtain some legitimacy might have acted as a selection pressure to draw some lines, but the scholars and consultants at the 1976 conference challenged each other and championed open boundaries.

The status of published research and the papers from the conference act as a benchmark for the traditions of organizational communication. Reproducing those outputs or increasing some of those efforts while diminishing others would be reinforcing that tradition. Furthermore, adding new ideas or methods as extensions of earlier ones would simply broaden the scope of traditions. A textual analysis of a company Facebook site using traditional rhetorical or sociological theory would be an example of this extension.

Hernes (1976) explained transitions as changes in the output and the parameters for any processes, but a transformation required a change in process. That is, transition occurs when social actors change outputs because there have been variations of degree in the process. Transformations are changes in the process itself. Typically, disruptions precede transformations, and the disruptions may be evidence of the limits of older processes, the natural accumulation of differences as parameters change, bifurcation within a system, or the occurrence of some environmental change. Studying the structure and the function of communication before studying the process would be the natural research transition, for example. However, using agent modeling to triangulate the conclusions from qualitative research would be a methodological transformation.

In 1996, Texas State hosted “Organizational Communication and Change”, the second of three conferences about organizational communication. Again, Salem used Murray’s discipline categories to review the literature and organize the conference. The papers demonstrated divergence and the development of variety in all aspects of the discipline. The breadth of ideas was remarkable, given the limitations of a small conference that featured twenty-one papers. Although all the attendees would have readily identified their research as “organizational communication”, the participants approached their research from many differing paradigms and perspectives.

Hampton Press published *Organizational Communication and Change* (Salem, 1999b), and the book included the 1996 conference program along with a list of attendees and selected papers from both conferences. Comparing the papers from the two conferences suggests both a maturation of a discipline and the potential for transformational change. Stacy (1996) described organizational change as a function of conflict between a legitimate system and a shadow system. The legitimate system consists of an

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