8. communications theory

EB335 DESIGNING CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS
communications theory

• Harold Lasswell (1948): WHO says WHAT in WHICH CHANNEL to WHOM with WHAT EFFECT? [the ‘Lasswell Formula’]

• W. L. Schramm systematised communications studies in the 1960s

• Schramm focused on essential conditions for communication (common language etc) between sender & receiver & their experiences of the communicative act

• DK Berlo (1960) SMCR (Sender, Message, Channel, Receiver) Model
recent theory + practice

• practical objection to Berlo SMCR model that it overlooks how communication is a ‘meaning making’ process.

• See, for instance, Corman, Tretheway & Goodall (2007) re US public diplomacy/nation branding

• Niklas Luhmann (sociological perspective): double contingency. communication entails a complex inter-dependence of the receiver’s perceptions of the sender’s motivations, sender’s perceptions of receiver’s prior assumptions.
a single field of study?

• seminal 1999 article by Robert T. Craig entitled “Communication Theory as a Field”

• 7 ‘traditions’ of communications research identified: rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, socio-psychological, sociocultural, and critical

• complementarities & conflicts between traditions might inform a positive ‘meta-discourse’ about the study of communications
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical</th>
<th>Semiotic</th>
<th>Phenomenological</th>
<th>Cybernetic</th>
<th>Sociopsychological</th>
<th>Sociocultural</th>
<th>Critical</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication theorized as:</td>
<td>The practical art of discourse</td>
<td>Intersubjective mediation by signs</td>
<td>Experience of otherness; dialogue</td>
<td>Information processing</td>
<td>Expression, interaction, &amp; influence</td>
<td>(Re)production of social order</td>
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<td>Problems of communication theorized as:</td>
<td>Social exigency requiring collective deliberation and judgment</td>
<td>Misunderstanding or gap between subjective viewpoints</td>
<td>Absence of, or failure to sustain, authentic human relationship</td>
<td>Noise; overload; underload; a malfunction or &quot;bug&quot; in a system</td>
<td>Situation requiring manipulation of causes of behavior to achieve specified outcomes</td>
<td>Conflict; alienation; misalignment; failure of coordination</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metadiscursive vocabulary such as:</td>
<td>Art, method, communicator, audience, strategy, commonplace, logic, emotion</td>
<td>Sign, symbol, icon, index, meaning, referent, code, language, medium, (mis)understanding</td>
<td>Experience, self &amp; other, dialogue, genuineness, supportiveness, openness</td>
<td>Source, receiver, signal, information, noise, feedback, redundancy, network, function</td>
<td>Behavior, variable, effect, personality, emotion, perception, cognition, attitude, interaction</td>
<td>Society, structure, practice, ritual, rule, socialization, culture, identity, coconstruction</td>
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<td>Plausible when appeals to metadiscursive commonplaces such as:</td>
<td>Power of words; value of informed judgment; improbability of practice</td>
<td>Understanding requires common language; omnipresent danger of miscommunication</td>
<td>All need human contact, should treat others as persons, respect differences, seek common ground</td>
<td>Identity of mind and brain; value of information and logic; complex systems can be unpredictable</td>
<td>Communication reflects personality; beliefs &amp; feelings bias judgments; people in groups affect one another</td>
<td>The individual is a product of society; every society has a distinct culture; social actions have unintended effects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interesting when challenges metadiscursive commonplaces such as:</td>
<td>Mere words are not actions; appearance is not reality; style is not substance; opinion is not truth</td>
<td>Words have correct meanings &amp; stand for thoughts; codes &amp; media are neutral channels</td>
<td>Communication is skill; the word is not the thing; facts are objective and values subjective</td>
<td>Humans and machines differ; emotion is not logical; linear order of cause &amp; effect</td>
<td>Humans are rational beings; we know our own minds; we know what we see</td>
<td>Individual agency &amp; responsibility; absolute identity of self; naturalness of the social order</td>
</tr>
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Table 7. Seven Traditions of Communication Theory
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<td>Against rhetoric</td>
<td>The art of rhetoric can be learned only by practice; theory merely distracts</td>
<td>We do not use signs; rather they use us</td>
<td>Strategic communication is inherently inauthentic &amp; often counterproductive</td>
<td>Intervention in complex systems involves technical problems rhetoric fails to grasp</td>
<td>Rhetoric lacks good empirical evidence that its persuasive techniques actually work as intended</td>
<td>Rhetorical theory is culture bound &amp; overemphasizes individual agency vs. social structure</td>
<td>Rhetoric reflects traditionalist, instrumentalist, &amp; individualist ideologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against semiotics</td>
<td>All use of signs is rhetorical</td>
<td>Langue is a fiction; meaning &amp; intersubjectivity are indeterminate</td>
<td>Langue-parole &amp; signifier-signified are false distinctions.</td>
<td>&quot;Meaning&quot; consists of functional relationships within dynamic information systems</td>
<td>Semiotics fails to explain factors that influence the production &amp; interpretation of messages</td>
<td>Sign systems aren't autonomous; they exist only in the shared practices of actual communities</td>
<td>Meaning is not fixed by a code; it is a site of social conflict</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| Against phenomenology   | Authenticity is a dangerous myth; good communica
tion must be artful, hence strategic          | Self & other are semiotically determined subject positions & exist only in/as signs | Other's experience is not experienced directly but only as constituted in ego's consciousness | Phenomenological "experience" must occur in the brain as information processing | Phenomenological introspection falsely assumes self-awareness of cognitive processes | Intersubjectivity is produced by social processes that phenomenology fails to explain | Individual consciousness is socially constituted, thus ideologically distorted |
| Against cybernetics     | Practical reason cannot (or should not) be reduced to formal calculation | Functionalist explanations ignore subtleties of sign systems | Functionalism fails to explain meaning as embodied, conscious experience | The observer must be included in the system, rendering it indeterminate | Cybernetics is too rationalistic; e.g., it underestimates the role of emotion | Cybernetic models fail to explain how meaning emerges in social interaction | Cybernetics reflects the dominance of instrumental reason |
| Against sociopsychology | Effects are situational and cannot be precisely predicted | Sociopsychological "effects" are internal properties of sign systems | The subject-object dichotomy of sociopsychology must be transcended | Communication involves circular causation, not linear causation | Sociopsychological theories have limited predictive power, even in social organization | Sociopsychological "laws" are culture bound & biased by individualism | Sociopsychology reflects ideologies of individualism, instrumentalism |
| Against sociocultural theory | Sociocultural rules, etc., are contexts & resources for rhetorical discourse | Sociocultural rules, etc., are all systems of signs | The social life-world has a phenomenological foundation | The functional organization of any social system can be modeled formally | Sociocultural theory is vague, untestable, ignores psychological processes that underlie all social order | Sociocultural order is particular & locally negotiated but theory must be abstract & general | Sociocultural theory privileges consensus over conflict & change |
| Against critical theory | Practical reason is based in particular situations, not universal principles | There is nothing immanent in every authentic encounter with tradition | Critique is immanent in every authentic encounter with tradition | Self-organizing systems models account for social conflict & change | Critical theory confuses facts & values, imposes a dogmatic ideology | Critical theory imposes an interpretive frame, fails to appreciate local meanings | Critical theory is elitist & without real influence on social change |
communication & social critique

• pioneers of critical communication studies were the so-called Frankfurt school of (generally) Marxists writing from the early 1930s on

• Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm

• saw mass communication for social control, suppression & violence (a la Nazi Germany) vs communicative forms that empowered & liberated

• Jurgen Habermas:‘theory of communicative action’

• envisages (normatively) a rational society based on communicational processes that allow emancipation of all individuals

• hence still modernist (upholding ideals of the Enlightenment)
post-modernism

• theoretical & analytical approaches to socio-cultural phenomenon, such as mass & private communications, that doubts the Enlightenment values of rationality, knowledge, advancement, & the institutions such ideals lend legitimacy to.

• challenges the idea of the human self as a subject with a unified coherent reason, thought, feelings & capability for positive action.

• doubts all universalist theories, ‘meta-narratives’, absolute truths

• focuses on the local, the particular

• concerned with the roles of language, rhetorical constructs, metaphors etc legitimate certain (unequal) social arrangements
postmodernism: implications

- reaction against ‘modernism’ (itself richly diverse) and its scientific and universalist aspirations (eg. in architecture, the ‘international style’)

- **Jean-Francois Lyotard** (1979): asserted a shift from ‘grandes histoires’ to ‘petites histoires’ (or *petit recit*; micro-narratives) from mid-1950s, which really was a radical critique of Cold War political dichotomies.

- postmodernism is essentially an aesthetic, & a label for a certain approach to the critical academic analysis of cultural artefacts

- it rejects hierarchies of importance for cultural products: making ‘pop culture’, street cultures etc analytically equivalent to high culture

- interested in micro-level agency: relevant to contemporary social-media based communication (though often over-theorised)
stars of postmodernism

• Jean Baudrillard: modern societies dominated by signs, information & cybernetic technologies: implosion of the gap between reality & simulation, creating a hyper-reality where simulation is reality.

• In fashion, idealised cities such as the ‘big Apple’ version of New York, model homes, even TV drama families, “...reality of the simulation becomes the benchmark for the real itself” (Woods, 2009: 27) Hyperreality conceals everyday life.

• Baudrillard does NOT judge this as bad, as it is inevitable.
stars of postmodernism II

- **Jacques Derrida** (& French post-structuralism)

- semiotic analysis using a technique of ‘deconstruction’

- generally ‘deconstructionism’: language & text are signs, referencing other signs, and which defy ultimate claims of truth or decisive interpretation

- Derrida *et al* emphasised the initial complexity of an event or reality (or the author’s experience of it) that then shapes the structure of a message (text) but which is never fully captured by it.
Audience savvy?

- Marxist notions of ‘alienation’ and ‘false consciousness’ (a la Antonio Gramsci etc) suggest audience passivity & gullibility re mass communications

- later Frankfurt school writers such as Fromm, Horkheimer, Marcuse & even Habermas also often implied or explicitly stated this.

- However postmodern writers see more scope for audiences to make a message their own, through finding new elements of meaning: audience exercising agency.

- However, old school Marxists & Frankfurt school writers are critical of postmodernists’ disinterest/pessimism about the lack of political consciousness by audiences in positions of socio-cultural weakness.