
Communication as . . .

Perspectives on Theory

Edited by
Gregory J. Shepherd
Ohio University

Jeffrey St. John
Ohio University

Ted Striphas
Indiana University

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For information:



Sage Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

Sage Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London, EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017 India

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Communication as—: perspectives on theory / editors Gregory J. Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas.
p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-4129-0657-1 (cloth) — ISBN 1-4129-0658-X (pbk.)

1. Communication—Philosophy. I. Shepherd, Gregory J. II. St. John, Jeffrey. III. Striphas, Theodore G. P90.C6292 2006 302.2'01—dc22

2005000648

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

05 06 07 08 09 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Senior Acquisitions Editor: Todd R. Armstrong
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Production Editor: Tracy Alpern
Copy Editor: Brenda Weight
Typesetter: C&M Digital (P) Ltd.
Indexer: Junice Oneida
Cover Designer: Edgar Abarca

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Communication as Articulation

Jennifer Daryl Slack

After years of reading and critiquing myriad definitions of communication, I feel the need to come clean. Let me get this out into the open: communication *is* the process of transmitting messages from sender to receiver, it *is* the process of encoding and decoding, it *is* the effect of a message on a receiver, it *is* the negotiation of shared meaning, it *is* community, it *is* ritual, it *is* . . . please feel free to fill in the ellipsis with your favored definition. Although I'll grant the significance of any sense of communication you desire, don't settle on or quote any part of that sentiment without this coda: communication is not *in essence* any of these, and it is not any of these *exclusively*. If the past two decades of communication scholarship have stumbled onto anything significant at all, it is the reality that there is no single, absolute essence of communication that adequately explains the phenomena we study. Such a definition does not exist; neither is it merely awaiting the next brightest communication scholar to nail it down once and for all.

To my mind—that is, thinking with articulation—this is not an undesirable state of affairs. Quite the opposite: liberated from the need to *be* any one thing, communication gives us permission to look long and hard at the world in order to explore how it works and how to change it. Thinking about communication *with* the idea of articulation gives us just that: permission to explore the workings of a complex world, figure out how it works, and propose changes to make it better. This is not to say that communication *is* articulation, although it is that, too. However, my argument

here resists the strategy adopted by most communication textbooks, which, in performing a huge disservice at this point in the history of the field, begin with a brief discussion of different definitions of communication yet settle on one. I want to resist opening the door merely to close it and thereby to close down thought that might accompany the copresence of multiple definitions before we've even gotten started. Indeed, thinking with articulation necessarily involves understanding that definitions of communication themselves respond to and perform articulating work and thereby contribute to shaping the world we set out to study and change. But let me work this through in something like a logical manner. In what follows, I first develop the argument that thinking with articulation helps us to understand the work definitions of communication perform. Embedded in this discussion is something like a definition of articulation. However, the manner in which I make my argument about the work of definitions of communication better demonstrates the principle of thinking communication as articulation than my asserting any particular definition. Then, I address the claim that thinking communication as articulation opens up a whole new way of looking at the world. Finally, I make a plea for respecting the political component of thinking with articulation, so that we might get on with understanding and changing the world: what I consider the real work and contribution of communication study.

Articulating Communication

Rejecting the idea of an imperial definition of communication does not necessitate rejecting simultaneously the importance of definitions that have been posed as such. Indeed, without imperial definitions of communication, we might not have a field from which to venture forth. Such is the articulated reality of intellectual, institutional, and political life. With Harold Lasswell's 1948 definition of communication as "*Who says what in which channel to whom with what effects,*" (Lasswell, 1948) and Wilbur Schramm's 1954 landmark book divided into sections that isolate messages, channels, audiences, and effects (Schramm, 1954), a field of study was given shape, a stage was set. Upon that stage, Lasswell, Schramm, and a host of others positioned themselves, and years later we position ourselves, to play a part in the ongoing drama: we certify ourselves as communication scholars, apply for grants, offer consulting services, develop departments, proselytize, offer degrees, and argue about the correctness of various characterizations of the field—surely a sign of the establishment of a field. Thank you, Harold, Wilbur, and others, of course, for opening that door.

What is most critical to remember about their foundational work, however, is that it occurred in a particular place, at a particular time, in a particular set of relations: in, as it were, the articulation of a real historical moment—something often referred to as a conjuncture. But before going any further, let me take a detour to explore my use of this term, *articulation*.

Typically, the term articulation denotes enunciation: if you articulate well, you state your case clearly. But articulation as used by cultural theorists takes on a slightly different inflection. Articulation, for cultural theorists, suggests two critical dynamics: a contingent joining of parts to make a unity or identity that constitutes a context, and the empowerment and disempowerment of certain ways of imagining and acting within that context.

With regard to the first dynamic, articulation refers to the way that different things (values, feelings, beliefs, practices, structures, organizations, ideologies, and so on) come into connection or relation at a particular historical conjuncture. These articulations are contingent, meaning that these different things might have come together differently. But given historical forces, relations, and accidents, things have come together in this particular way. Just as a joint articulates bones to make, for example, an arm, a conjuncture is the articulation of social and cultural forces and relations that similarly constitute a particular historical moment as a kind of unity—for example, an antiterrorist climate in the United States after the September 11 attack on the Trade Towers in New York City. An arm might have been articulated differently: it might, for example, have been articulated to bend backward as well as forward. Similarly, the antiterrorist climate might have been articulated differently: with, for example, more emphasis on the forces within the United States that contributed to the terrorism against this country.

With regard to the second dynamic, an articulated sociocultural conjuncture does the work of empowering ways of thinking, being, and acting in the world as possible or not. Just as an arm renders some sorts of movements possible and others unlikely or impossible, so, too, do sociocultural conjunctures render some sorts of movement possible and others unlikely or impossible. An articulated sociocultural conjuncture thus necessarily will have particular and significant effects, creating a sort of map of what is possible and what is not, who or what is valued and who or what is not, who or what benefits and who or what does not. For example, since September 11 in the United States, it has become very easy to violate once-accepted practices of personal privacy and very difficult to challenge increases in defense spending. Likewise, it has become difficult for most Americans even to imagine a kind of patriotism that does not blindly wave the flag and support whatever is proposed by President George W. Bush.

Neither the character of an articulated conjuncture nor the possibilities thus empowered are guaranteed. In other words, a conjuncture never is “sewn up,” or an absolutely fixed unity, but a web of articulating, dynamic movements among variously homogeneous and heterogeneous forces and relations. Consequently, articulation is an ongoing process of disconnecting, reconnecting, reinforcing, and contradicting movements. So, unlike an articulated arm, an example that conveys a sense of fixity, an articulated conjuncture is always more supple, variously open to possibilities for change, given the particular play of social antagonisms and tensions, the efforts of real people to foster new connections, the effects of new forms of organization, and the important role of accident. Thus, the post–September 11 antiterrorist climate in the United States is variously open to possibilities for change given what people imagine they can and should do, and given what forces, antagonisms, and tensions are possible to develop or exploit.

As scholars of communication who think with articulation, we do not read the history of communication theory as the process of discovering what communication *is*. Rather we read it as articulating—that is, connecting, bringing together, unifying, inventing, contributing to—a sort of force field of relations within which it made sense to talk about communication in a particular way: for the most part as the sending and receiving of messages, the goal of which was persuasion. As the history of communication theory reveals, some of the articulating forces that contributed to this conjuncture include the state of social theory, the development of media technologies, the promises of marketing, the fear of propaganda, and the disciplinary nature of the university. The version of communication that emerged has been persistent and popular, due to both the persistence and development of relations that have sustained it: among them, the acceleration of a commercial culture using techniques of persuasion; the mainstreaming of marketing and propaganda techniques in the politics of everyday life; the increasing tendency to situate people-as-receivers in relation to the development of new media technologies; the enactment of governmental policies built on this model of communication; and the establishment of educational programs and consulting services that continue to infiltrate the culture with this particular version of communication.

Something I learned from the philosopher Louis Althusser (1970, 1971) long ago in his elaborations on ideology is relevant here: a belief (more correctly, an ideology, in Althusser’s terms) does not have to be true to be powerful in its effects, and therefore, for all practical purposes, real. Circulating definitions and concomitant practices of communication are real in their effects, hence real and worthy of analysis. Thinking with articulation is a way to comprehend the power of a concept, the work it performs, its reality, without being seduced into accepting it as an absolute truth or as an

unchanging essence. Thinking with articulation also encourages a certain distance that permits a reading of the force field, set of relations, or context within which a world takes shape and within which (sometimes against which) we give it shape. As Karl Marx has taught us, we make the world, but we do not do so under conditions of our own making. Thinking with the concept of articulation, we map the conditions we inherit as well as envision how we might move on from there.

Communication as Articulation

If we envision communication as articulation, my second point, our attention is most obviously drawn to the contingent relations that constitute competing effective definitions and practices of communication. But beyond that, and far more significantly, envisioning communication as articulation, as seen through the work of Ernesto Laclau (1977) and Stuart Hall (see, for example, 1986), opens up a whole new way of looking at the world. It demands a broader, more encompassing acknowledgment and exploration of how the world works as a matter of multiple, contingent, articulating relations among forms of expression, the content of expression, materiality, economics, politics, and power. It insists, as early communication theory did not, that communication cannot be studied apart from, as Hall has argued “(a) a general social theory, (b) a developed cultural theory, and (c) a properly historicized model of social formations” (Hall, 1989, p. 43).

The gift that communication has bestowed, beyond the designation of a legitimate field of study, is precisely the historical proposition that communication *is* about expression: of how we understand the world, of how our understandings of and responses to the world shape individual actions and give shape to society. When that legacy is articulated to the broader insight that contingent sociocultural conjunctures more generally constitute meaningful reality in ways that differentially empower possibility and therefore unequal relations of power, the study of communication becomes a critical site from which to interrogate and celebrate what is interesting, liberating, and life-giving. At the same time, it becomes a powerful site from which to interrogate and challenge what is stultifying, oppressive, and life destroying. It is as though communication has become the site where we are allowed to address—unfettered by disciplinary and methodological limitations of earlier ways of studying communication—what really matters, and consider how we might make life better.

Though communication scholars and students may be freer than most to shake off disciplinary limitations, we also are encouraged to draw on

disciplinary insights to craft a necessarily interdisciplinary story of the world. To explain phenomena that matter—whether we begin with more traditional communication studies topics such as the meanings of television programs or the significance of images of romance, or more far-reaching matters such as the significance of new biotechnologies or the cultural context of war—the approach to communication as articulation requires looking at the far-ranging contingent articulations that constitute those phenomena. So, for example, a message can be seen as having an effect; given a particular configuration of the sociocultural conjuncture, talking about the effect of the message on an audience might make sense. However, what matters about a message is never *just* that. There may be a component of ritual involved in the reception. There may be significant community building involved in the transmission. There will be a political-economic context within which the message is produced, delivered, and received. There will be differential privileging of certain ways of being in the world over others: some possibilities empowered, others disempowered; some cultural groups empowered, others disempowered. Many kinds of articulations will matter, depending on the phenomena under consideration: political-economic relations; the work of ideological assumptions; forces of globalism, capitalism, and consumerism; material components of technology; biological components; the sense of what it means to be human; the experience of affect; and so on. This list is neither exhaustive nor constituted by mutually exclusive categories. Communication as articulation does not provide a neatly wrapped method with which to hammer the world into a predetermined form. It offers instead a vantage point from which creatively to engage a richly constituted world, to offer explanations and interventions that make sense in a particular historical conjuncture.

Had I been able to title this essay to my liking, rather than to the demand for consistency among contributions, I would have called it “Articulating Communication: A Position Just Shy of Communication as Articulation.” The assertion of “a position just shy of communication as articulation” is meant to resist substituting communication as articulation as *the* metaphor or definition that most accurately describes communication. Rather, as I have tried to make clear above, thinking with the concept of articulation allows me to acknowledge—regardless of the object of analysis—the vast articulation of relations within which some beliefs and behaviors are valued and encouraged over others and certain structures of privilege and discrimination are maintained. The communication scholar or student who thinks with articulation undertakes the daunting task of mapping the multiple articulations of a sociocultural conjuncture. Her or his purpose in doing so is to expand understanding outward into the complex reality of the world rather

than to restrict vision to a misleadingly limited, albeit more comfortable, perspective—either for the sake of being manageable or for the sake of avoiding uncomfortable political realities. No researcher can do everything, hence the challenge for the communication researcher who thinks with articulation: how to draw the map with attention sufficiently outward to see and say something significant about the complex articulations, without getting so lost in the complexity as to say nothing at all? This is art, just as science at its best is art. But this is also clearly politics.

A Plea for Politics

My third and final point, a plea really, is to argue that thinking with articulation—regardless of the object of analysis in communication with which we begin—leads us to what matters most in the sociocultural conjuncture: the work of politics and power in the structure and experience of life, to the tendencies, trajectories, and affects within which the world is given shape. When found wanting, we ought to have at least understood the conjuncture well enough to begin to suggest ways of rearticulating or reorganizing contingent articulations in ways that might change the world for the better.

There are, of course, no guarantees that the recognition of communication as articulation will be used in this way, for it is simply too easy to adopt articulation as a method that permits the isolation of particular articulations of interest while turning a Dantean blind eye to matters of politics and power. As Hall warned long ago, “articulation contains the danger of a high formalism” (Hall, 1980, p. 69). By this, he means that articulation can be applied in a formulaic manner, so as to point to the fact that one thing is articulated to another while ignoring the unexpected and rich complexity of the real world as well as the complex relations of power that occur in any conjuncture. Communication scholars typically make too little of communication with the retreat into formalism. When communication means, almost by rote, nothing more than effective writing or speaking, the rhetorical analysis of content, the effect of this particular message on that particular behavior, the celebration of difference, the expression of community, the enactment of ritual, the implementation of new media, or even merely the point that one thing is articulated to another, it has been hijacked by Dante’s neutrals, deprived of exercising the historical muscle that has been laid at our feet. Dante’s neutrals, who occupy the first circle in Hell, are those whose refusal to act when given the opportunity supports *de facto* political oppression (see Canto III in Dante’s *Inferno*, 1994).

Repeatedly, when I read studies in communication that find comfort—indeed, mastery—in a restricted “scientific” version of method, I am astonished that so many competent scholars seem content with the neatness of their work, the conformity of their method and approach, to the detriment of reaching critical insights about the world they are studying. When Stuart Hall (1992, p. 280) states that “the only theory worth having is that which you have to fight off, not that which you speak with profound fluency,” he warns us away from taking any theory, including articulation, and reifying it into a paper cutout with which to withdraw from the unexpected richness and complexity of the real world as well as to the political realities of oppression. If indeed communication is articulation, a position which demands the exploration of the range and effects of articulating relations in sociocultural conjunctures, then to study communication ought to be nothing less than the search to liberate human potential while honoring the richly articulated life-giving interconnections that sustain the world of which we are part.

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