Communication Theory

Communication and Constitution:
Exploring Classical and Emerging Topics Relationally

Special issue

Guest editors:

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Overview:

In his landmark 1999 article, *Communication Theory as a Field*, Robert T. Craig called for more dialogue between what he then identified as the seven traditions of communication (rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetic, socio-psychology, sociocultural theory and critical theory). This call was based on two principles: (1) the constitutive model of communication as a metamodel and (2) communication theory as metadiscourse. With his first principle, Craig invited us to acknowledge that each of these different traditions has its own way of *thinking the world communicatively* and that there is a real payoff in studying various phenomena as being *communicatively constituted*. With his second principle, he proposed that the communication discipline could be envisaged as a sort of *metadiscourse*, that is, a discourse about discourse by which we pursue the study of one of the most basic phenomena of our human condition: the act of communicating.

Almost 25 years later, this article can be said to have had a key influence on our field (e.g., Donsbach, 2006; Gardner, 2018; Shumate and O'Connor, 2010), as illustrated by the numerous research agendas that have implicitly or explicitly responded to Craig's call. Consider for example, the Communication as Constitutive of Organization (CCO) approach (Putnam and Nicotera, 2009), which positions communicative acts as the basic building blocks of organizational processes. There is also the constitutive approach to interpersonal and family communication studies (Baxter, 2014; Manning, 2014), which shows that we co-create not only our relationships, but also our very selves in social interaction, as well as the communicative constitution of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Stohl and Stohl, 2011), which demonstrates how online and offline political activities are first and foremost enacted through a logic of connective action.

Echoing John Dewey's (1916) pragmatist perspective on communication, all these approaches claim, in spite of their differences, that we should not only think of communication as something that happens in, say, organizations, families, or

communities, but that these collectives should also be apprehended as *constituted in communication* (Bartesaghi and Castor, 2008; Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Livingstone, 2009; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). More broadly, recent developments on relational ontology (Condit, 2006; Cooren, 2018; Kuhn et al., 2017; Martine & De Maeyer, 2019; Murphy & Castro-Sotomayor, 2021; Richardson & Wilken, 2023) contribute to the advance of this constitutive view. Each of these approaches indeed illustrates how thinking relationally about the world amounts to acknowledging that any being or phenomenon is literally *made of/constituted by relations* (between humans, but also between humans and other-than-humans, as well as between other-than-humans themselves), a stance that obviously positions communication as the ideal discipline to address this type of ontological claim.

Against this background, this special issue of Communication Theory aims to address the following questions:

(1) What does a constitutive understanding of communication mean for the study of classical and emergent topics, as are identities, ecosystems, sustainability, technology, gender, ethnicity, organizations, relationships, coalitions, power, authority, creativity, discrimination, domination, disability, among others?

(2) How can a relational/constitutive perspective enable scholars to see empirical and theoretical linkages among the various subfields of communication. What do these linkages mean in practice?

(3) How are worlds communicatively constituted? That is, how is a phenomenon or even any state of being *made of* or *constituted by* communication?

(4) How might constitutive approaches place communication as a central action or activity by which topics/phenomena can be analyzed and explained?

(5) How can we make connections across theoretical traditions via embracing communication theory as a metadiscourse? And how might this shape how we think through our scholarship, especially in terms of theory/theorizing?

(6) How, in an increasingly globalized world, might scholars nurture and/or deconstruct the relations that constitute the various phenomena that we as communication scholars study?

We especially encourage empirical and theoretical essays that position communication as an *explanans* (what does the explaining) and not as an *explanandum* (what is to be explained). In other words, and in keeping with Craig's (1999) call, we are looking for manuscripts that show that the world as we know it, in all its instantiations, can be studied and explained relationally, that is, communicatively.

Scholars and researchers representing all the sub-disciplines of communication are encouraged to submit.

Deadline for the submission of manuscripts: **November 1, 2024. All manuscripts will have to follow the [journal submission guidelines](#).**

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