

ECOLOGICAL VALIDITY AND SPECIAL THEORIES
THE NEW CORPORATE COMMUNICATION STYLE

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Speech Communication Association

Annual Convention

Chicago, IL

November 2, 1990

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Scholars studying communication have tended to use the term theory in imprecise ways. In order to provide a theoretical explanation of such concepts as operational validity or ecological validity it is useful to distinguish two of the more important meanings for the term theory. I will characterize one meaning as general theories and the other as special theories. General theories of communication are analogous to the theories of the natural sciences that account for broad classes of events. They contain generalizations that cut across conventional usages and recurring forms. General theories apply to events in the past and the present as well as to what might happen in the future. They cut across the different special theories that govern communication practices in different times and cultures. General theories contain social scientific statements that explain how the world works. To qualify as part of a general theory a statement usually should be supported by careful and systematic research. Hypotheses and hunches are an important part of basic research, but until they are tested and supported they cannot be integrated in a general theoretical structure.

Special theories are those artistic formulations that specify the nature of conventional forms and usages and provide practical advice on how to use and criticize communication. They are specific to a certain time and culture and function. They contain information about how to communicate in recurring situations. Special theories are what make up most of our communication textbooks and handbooks that explain the nuts and bolts of how to communicate more effectively.

General theories are important in many communication formulations. People who jump out of airplanes are well advised to have some rudimentary knowledge about the law of gravity. Still, a special recurring form of human activity such as skydiving will be guided by a special theory that enables people to participate in parachute jumps and modify them artistically within the limits posed by the law of gravity. The same relationship holds for general and special theories of communication.

For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on the role of special theories in ecological or operational validity and experiential learning. Recently Craig has argued that the tie that binds the various scholars and practitioners in the field of communication together is that it is a "practical discipline" and that "what is most interesting and distinctive about the field" is the "intimate tie that exists between the discipline's work and practical communicative activities." He goes on to suggest that

many of the scholars who indulge in methodological and philosophical discussions of theory have stressed what I defined above as general theories. He would argue that "As a practical discipline, our essential purpose is to cultivate communicative praxis, or practical art, through critical study. All of our work does, or should pursue that purpose." (Craig, 1989, pp. 97-98.) Although Craig and I disagree about some matters including whether or not my category of general theories is useful, we do agree on the importance of special theories for the discipline (Bormann, 1989).

In this paper I will examine one special theory in terms of experiential learning and suggest some ethical concerns that those involved in practical as well as scholarly criticism would have when evaluating such communication.

My argument is that since the first world war, early in the twentieth century, there has evolved a new style of communication with its associated special theory. I call the emergent form of communication the new corporate communication style. My position is that the full implications of this special theory are as yet dimly understood by practitioners and scholars. Indeed, the connoisseurs of the special theory have often learned their craft by means of experiential learning. Early in its evolution as a special theory, those who learned it did so by means of on-the-job training and serving as apprentices to master practitioners. The theory has been mature for several decades and courses are springing up in academic settings to promulgate the theory and practice. In the academic setting experiential learning remains a major way for learning the communication style. Such learning typically takes place in hands-on courses where students simulate real-world situations or serve as interns in on-the-job settings in order to learn the craft required to produce the recurring patterns of the style.

There has been considerable controversy among scholars over the advisability of offering courses in the new style for academic credit. After all the specialists learned their craft experientially and the style evolved and matured outside the walls of academy. Some of those in the older more established departments view such teaching and its associated communication practices as lacking in substance and scholarly importance. They see the study and practice of the new corporate communication as essentially shoddy and unethical and find it on a par with other trivial subjects to be allowed only on the fringes of higher education if at all. For those in the more

established areas of communication study the special theory associated with the new corporate communication style has been equally problematic. Many of these scholars have worried about triviality and, paradoxically, about the ethical implications. In short when we deplore the crasser features of the communication we tend to stress that the forms of communication in question are not trivial at all.

In the remainder of the paper I will describe the special theory and its associated practice and follow with a discussion of the implications of the new style for rhetorical critics with an emphasis on the need for a new ethic of communication.

Special Theories Described

A special communication theory emerges from a process in which practice leads to criticism that modifies practices and, in turn, leads to further theory. Theory, once it has emerged, modifies practice and criticism. The process is, thus, reciprocal in that theory modified by practice and criticism also subsequently shapes both.

Special theories are joint ventures that require the participants in a communication event to act according to some agreed-upon model of how they will communicate with one another. In order to participate in a joint venture, potential communicators must know the proper script to follow. In addition to knowing what to do and when to do it, participants must agree to work together to obey the rules, conventions, and ideals of the special theory that applies.

A mature special theory consists of three major elements. The first major element is a philosophical rationale. The rationale provides a justification for the communication and includes statements of the purpose, function, and correctness of the approach. The second major element is an ideal model. The model is prescriptive and explains in detail what an ideal communication event would be like. The third part of the theory consists of practical advice on how best to communicate in order to achieve the ideal model.

In the last thirty years the changes in public discourse have been staggering. To the mass press and radio have been added television. Even more startling have been the rapid changes brought about by developments in computerized information processing and transmission (Golden, 1988). These media (Information Technology) transmit messages which are, today, the product of the professionalization of communication. To that professionalization our own discipline has made a major contribution and in

recent years some in our discipline have begun to teach courses utilizing the special theory of corporate communication.

The ghostwriter is only one element in the growing professionalism and software technology that characterizes the new special theory. Every major institution in our society from the executive branch of the government to the local utility firm has ghostwriters, media specialists, public relations counselors, and a panel of people who project the appropriate persona to the public by having designated people in formal positions reading speeches, conducting news conferences, and staging media events.

These specialists are narrowly but thoroughly trained in the ideal model and the arts and crafts associated with the special theory. They are expert in such matters as polling, in-depth interviewing, preparing campaign themes, writing speeches and press releases, selecting media buys, and preparing commercial messages for press, radio, and TV. For the most part these specialists are increasingly hired guns who subscribe to the philosophical rationale of the special theory that draws an analogy between communicators and lawyers hired to defend a client and attack the client's enemies regardless of the product, company, or policy they promulgate. The philosophical rationale also includes the notion that the ultimate goal of an ideal communication campaign is success as measured by such criteria as polling results, voter affirmation, sales, money-raising, and public goodwill for the symbols created by the messages.

An example that illustrates the new style in operation is provided by a political campaign in the Southwest. Several years ago a professor of speech communication named Benson (1981) took a leave of absence to answer a friend's call to be part of the crew that would be "doing political ads for a dude who's running for Congress in Sunbelt City." (p. 347) He subsequently wrote a long, detailed, and soul-searching memoir of his experience in the Quarterly Journal of Speech. In addition to the three-person crew making political ads the team included "two guys and a staff" from the Cooper Stewart Agency. According to Benson's friend, "These guys are the big league. Clark is one of the four people approved by the Republican Party to do their polls. They're both about your age. They manage campaigns, do polls, make the ads, buy media time, radio, television, newspaper advertising, write the speeches, everything. They just come in and take over the whole campaign." (p. 352)

Benson and his friend were veterans of the new left days of the late 1960s and early 1970s and were working in the 1980 campaign for a conservative born-again Republican. At one point they were filming what they call a "bio spot". They have the candidate walking out the front door of his house and kissing his wife. They film a family volleyball game as the children tease the candidate because this is the first time he has ever played a game with them. In Benson's words,

We all understand -- though it still strikes Richard's children as astonishing and wonderful -- that the bio spot is "conceptual". That is to say, it is composed of images that reveal what we wish to establish as conceptually true of Richard, though it is not descriptively true. Richard does not walk out of the house in the morning and pause, briefcase in hand, to kiss Barbara goodbye. . .Nor does Richard play volleyball. All of us find ways to excuse the small deceptions that these advertisements seem to require For us they are a matter of translating a person and an ambition into a set of ready-made myths and symbols, the visual rhetoric of contemporary American politics. Each deception, carried out in the name of professionalism and the necessities of mediated mass communication, is a small corruption. Television news does much the same thing in transforming physical facts into visual images. (1981, p. 380)

The essence of the new style is to portray personae as the movers and shakers of society. These personae serve as symbols to be managed by the communication teams practicing the corporate style. An examination of how decisions are made is important to understand the relationship of the new style to experience.

The conventional wisdom to be found in many organizational communication books is that decisions are made by top management and communicated downward to middle and lower management and then implemented by supervisors who explain them to workers. On this model of organizational communication the information flow to upper management must be open and sufficient for the top people to make policy, set goals, and establish plans. Once members of upper management make a decision they communicate it downward to lower levels of management.

The model is essentially rational. The decision-making is characterized by systematic search procedures for data, careful weighing of alternatives, thorough consultations and deliberation, and a final decision on the facts.

In the case of the Executive Branch of the Federal Government the model often involves the president as personally making the difficult decisions. Indeed, the central political ad of the Carter reelection campaign of 1980 showed the big chair in the Oval Office and discussed the fact that all the tough decisions ended up there. (In one presidential election I saw a cartoon in which a boyish Daniel Quayle was hitting a golf ball resting on top of the presidents desk using "the button," that fearful nuclear button, for a tee.)

At Minnesota for three decades now we have been investigating organizational communication by making case studies of simulated organizations of several months duration. Our case study (Bormann, Pratt, and Putnam, 1978) of "Power, Authority, and Sex: Male Response to Female Leadership" that was published some years ago in Communication Monographs is an example of the case studies we have done. We completed some thirty such case studies.

We began the research program with essentially the rationale model of top level decision making in mind. In fact, we may even have what Franklyn Haiman (1984) called the "cult of leadership" in his perceptive essay on ghostwriting as part of our viewpoint. As he put it:

. . . those in positions of authority -- as well as many in their audiences -- wish to create and perpetuate a myth -- a myth that authority figures are all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-doing -- a cult of leadership which endows the father or mother figure with superhuman capacities and turns away from the reality that in any group, organization or society the functions of leadership are, to one degree or another, inevitably shared. (1984, p. 302)

However, as our case studies continued we found that the fantasy type which portrayed the leader as making the big decisions such as Lee Iococca turning Chrysler Corporation around, Lyndon Johnson escalating the Vietnam war, Ronald Reagan causing the drop in interest and inflation rates explained very little about what was happening. To that end it is constructive to note what McPherson, a speechwriter for

Lyndon Johnson, said in an oral history interview for Lyndon Johnson's library.

McPherson made the following comment:

One of the things I learned in government, to my surprise was that very frequently you can't tell when something is happening. You have a meeting; it's called for the purpose of developing a policy; you finish the meeting and you're not really sure whether the policy is any different from what it was when you walked in the room or not. And the only thing that gives you a sense of finality about the meeting is the assignment of some person to draft up the sense of the meeting. When that's done, you can usually get the sense that something has happened.

Moya Ball's doctoral dissertation (1988) studying the small group decision-making in the Kennedy and Johnson administration in relation to escalation of the Vietnam war supports McPherson's conclusion but this time with extensive documentation from the archives at the Kennedy and Johnson Libraries.

In our case studies we found a pattern in which the chief executive officers were going through motions that they interpreted in their shared fantasies as decision-making but which had little or no effect on what was going on in the rest of the organization.

How then are decisions made? They were often made on the spot by the people most concerned with them who might then report what they were doing upward until the message reached upper management while that group was still mulling over what to do with the problem. This was the essential pattern that Ball discovered in studying the Kennedy papers in regard to the assassination of Premier Deim. Sometimes those concerned made the decision and simply went on with their work, ignoring the upper administration until another problem arose.

Big organization-wide decisions often came about because at first small groups and then a substantial community within the organization began to share fantasies that implied certain values and actions. If this climate of opinion grew into a rhetorical vision and this vision gained momentum a decision would emerge before any formal rubber stamping by upper management or the chief executive officer. Chief executive officers who tried to go counter to the climate of opinion might fight a delaying action

but in the end they tended to succumb. This was the pattern that I found in the Johnson Administration's decision to cease the escalation of the Vietnam war.

Of course when a big decision is made in the above fashion it is often incumbent upon the Chief Executive Officer to announce it. If the Chief is the President of the United States the speech may be broadcast on television in its entirety as Lyndon Johnson did in his famous March 31, 1968 speech that announced a change in the policy of handling the Vietnam war and also his withdrawal from the presidential race. The first decision in Johnson's speech came about as a result of the pattern that I described earlier. The second decision was made by Lyndon Johnson.

Important decisions made by business and industrial companies as well as many other organizations tend to be reported to stakeholders in speeches made by the appropriate officials. These decisions are usually not made according to the script in the great man or woman fantasy type but are the result of communication by a large number of people structured in many formal and informal groupings. Again the end result is often the work of the amateurs performing discourse which is largely the work of the professional communication technicians.

In the early fifties I also became interested in speechwriting and found that practice much more widespread than I had thought. I was outraged with the certainty that speechwriting was unethical. I liked the characterization of ghostwriting as "Putting up decoy authors to fool the guileless." In those years I was convinced that deception was the heart of the speechwriting practice, that speechwriting was essentially plagiarism, and that it trivialised public discourse. For all these reasons I felt that students who were learning to criticize public address should also be taught how to make ethical judgments about the messages. To my mind education about ethical rhetorical criticism was important training for citizenship in a representative democracy for all students. Recently the teaching about ethical communication has become more widespread. Certainly this is a development to be lauded but I am becoming more and more worried about the criteria we use for such ethical analysis and the applicability of it to an important segment of the contemporary scene -- the preparation and dissemination of corporate messages.

What surprised me even more, however, was that many of my colleagues who defended the practice of ghostwriting when they criticized rhetoric treated the discourse as though it were the product of the individual who spoke the words. This recognition, on the one hand, that the public spokesperson has not developed the messages and, on the other hand, the tacit treatment of the discourse as though the spokesperson had developed the messages has continued to this day.

We have in our journals a plethora of rhetorical criticism which studies a wide range of messages and assumes that the speeches of presidents such as Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and Bush can be studied as though the presidents actually had a major role in their production. The same holds true for other spokespersons for many causes, industrial and business corporations, and other organizations. To the rhetorical history and criticism of such efforts the critics often bring a traditional perspective which views the communication event as involving a speaker who has an important influence on the discourse and adapts it more or less successfully to the target audiences. By analyzing the discourse the rhetorical critic can make judgments about the speaker in terms of intellectual abilities, quality of mind, personal characteristics, and ethical responsibilities. As Jaksa and Pritchard (1988) in a book about communication ethics put it:

We appreciate persuaders who first conduct careful and conscientious research before attempting "to make truth effective." We want persuaders to be honest, disclosing important and relevant information for the case at hand. The great Roman teacher Quintilian summarized these qualities in saying "The perfect orator is a good man speaking well. (1988. pp. 34-35)

A similar touchstone that emphasized the importance of use of language and the style of presentation was caught by the aphorism, "Style is the man."

Thus, if a President gives a speech in which he lies to the American People he can be chastised. (In my home state of Minnesota we have had a candidate for governor take a "lie detector test.") If candidates participate in a debate and tell a half truth the critic can make an ethical judgment about them and hold them responsible.

My comments today pose the question of how do the practices of the special theory of corporate communication impact on our society in general and the ethics of communication in particular?

Towards the end of his article Benson comes to the point in his work where he must deal with the ethical questions. He wonders if someone is responsible for the corruptions and deceptions of the communication.

If there is a villain, is it this hospitable millionaire? Or the ad man from Los Angeles who, whatever his beliefs, works only for one brand of conservative Republicans? Or Gary, the SDS activist, using his brilliant talents in the aide of a context he cannot believe in? Or is the villain the man who not only does not believe the messages he is helping to create, but who sees all of this as a research trip? There is certainly a case to be made against each of us? (1981, p. 375)

Still, in the final analysis the question seems beyond this century's ethical codes guiding professional communicators. The specialists are all aiming at doing a professional job -- a job of which they can be proud on aesthetic grounds -- and the responsibility for the discourse is lost amidst the corporate efforts of all the different technicians.

The importance of doing a good job on aesthetic grounds in the philosophical rationale for the special theory is illustrated by a case in Minnesota. Some time ago a newspaper television columnist (Holston, 1990, 1E, 8E) reported that a Twin-Cities television station, WCCO broadcast a three-part series entitled "Deadly Injustice." The station's I-Team developed the programs that suggested four girls had been run off the highway by another car driven by a man whom the team named and showed on the screen. After a criminal investigation resulting from the series, County officials reported there would be no indictment because the program's ostensible new evidence fell short of the minimal requirements for prosecution. Subsequently the man who was implicated by WCCO; and whose face, at one point, was superimposed over the four dead girls's memorial marker announced plans to sue the station for libel. The television station had in the meantime entered the program in the Midwest regional Emmy awards competition and won. When told about the criticism leveled at "Deadly injustice" in Minnesota, the chairman of the awards committee, Edward Morris, a communications professor at Columbia College in Chicago, said that the "news emmys are not judged for fairness and accuracy. 'They're really being judged on the presentation.'" The columnist for the Minneapolis Star Tribune added that:

"Presentation may be everything when it comes to entertainment programming, but one expects journalism to be judged on something more than lighting, camera work, and action."

Ethics and the New Corporate Communication Style

In my judgment our ethical frameworks for evaluating communication tend to be holdovers from the nineteenth century. Medhurst (1987, p. 241) makes an insightful commentary in which he argues that Haiman, Bormann, and Auer in their concerns about the ethics of ghostwriting tend to obscure "many practical benefits that students of public communication can derive from the study of ghostwritten speeches". But even Medhurst goes on to make his case largely in a nineteenth century framework. He suggests that ghostwritten discourse can be studied to find the inventional resources of the speaker, the effect of the speeches, the effect of context on invention, disposition, and style, and the inventional process that leads to public discourse.

Several years ago the rhetorical critics, Thomas B. Farrell and G. Thomas Goodnight published a study they called "Accidental Rhetoric: The Root Metaphors of Three Mile Island" (1981) in which they argued that the nature of complex communication systems that we often take for granted are occasionally revealed by symbolically and materially powerful accidents such as the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island.

After a careful analysis of the situation they concluded that the accident drew to it some of the most thoroughly trained and able communication specialists in the country. The utility company had its staff of public relations experts at work, the state government had its communication specialists, President Carter had his communication team, the Nuclear Regulatory Agency had its communication specialists, the radio and television networks were on the job, as were the major newspapers. But when all was said and done, the American people were provided with an avalanche of communication but very little of it provided the social knowledge they needed to make wise decisions. Even the people living in the neighborhood of Three Mile Island were unsure as to whether to leave, to stay, or what they should do to protect themselves. Farrell and Goodnight concluded:

A Presidential Task Force investigating the crisis concluded that the communication incompetence was so widespread that popular explanations

("that the utility lied, that the NRC covered up . . . , or that the media engaged in an orgy of sensationalism") were not credible . . . the communication networks in place before the accident were unable to anticipate problems or prepare suitable spokespersons to present "timely, accurate, and understandable information," (1981, p. 294)

How can we teach students to evaluate the rhetoric associated with Three Mile Island when the communication is the result of such complex team work? I think that the long-standing and attractive traditions of the speaker being a good man or woman speaking well and defending the truth and being solely responsible for the discourse are no longer viable. When the spokesperson appears on the TV news for a 90 second bite out of a longer comment prepared by a series of committees the old criteria mask the corporate nature of today's communication and the ethical responsibilities of the people who contributed to it.

Today much of the important information results when someone speaks as the mouthpiece for a large corporate structure as does a candidate for the presidency or vice-presidency, as does the president of the United States or the CEO of any corporation or organization, as does the representative of a voluntary organization, or the spokesperson for a reform or revolutionary movement. When these comments are further processed by radio and television journalists, technicians in the control rooms, by whole news organizations then the exclusive praise or blame of the persona who delivered the message for the corporate entity is too simple. I wish I had a recipe to provide for the teaching of ethics for the new style of communication. Certainly our students in courses in ghostwriting, public relations, persuasion, radio and television production, acting, lighting, sound, cutting, montage need to have these ethical issues raised in their courses. The ethics of effectiveness and aesthetic beauty are not enough.

Probably we need more guidelines for team players, whistleblowers, and hired guns. But certainly we in the speech communication profession need to start reorienting our thinking about ethical problems to bring them into the twenty-first century. As critics and practitioners we need to revise the philosophical rationale for the new corporate communication special theory and provide a thoughtful and useful ethical component.

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