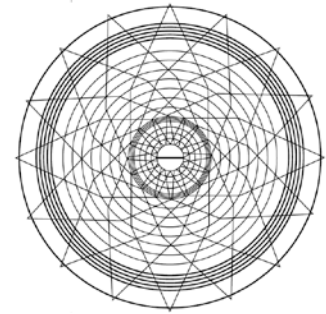


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COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

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Abstract:

This essay provides one of the ways of looking at the communication area of inquiry as a science or rather sciences, and proposes an approach to identifying what unites all communication sciences together and distinguishes them from other sciences – in other words, what makes communication unique. The essay claims that communication sciences are ontologically distinguishable from other sciences because a phenomenon under the investigation of the communication is the meaning of an object or a process rather than an object or a process itself. As such, communication sciences are unique in their focus on the informational worth of objects under study – bits, while other sciences focus on the material worth of the objects – atoms.

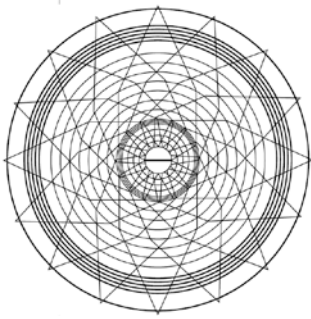
Keywords: communication science, communication theory, theory and practice, aim of communication, subject of communication

IS COMMUNICATION A SCIENCE?

Machlup (1961) claims that he observes an “inferiority complex” (p. 173) among many social scientists, who argue whether or not social sciences deserve to be called a science at all. The question leads to the existence of two polar schools of thought often labelled as “naturalists” and “humanists” (see for example, Fay & Moon, 1977). Naturalists believe that social sciences should follow the same guidelines as natural sciences, while humanists declare that “social life cannot adequately be studied scientifically” (Fay & Moon, 1977, p. 209). Fay and Moon (1977) conclude, “Whole models of social science have been propounded that argue for one position and view the other as incompatible alternative” (p. 209). The same is true in a specific subset of social sciences – communication.

Interestingly enough, Thomas Kuhn, author of “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,” observes that the debates similar to the “recurrent debates about whether one or another of the contemporary social sciences is really a science” (p.





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160) were quite common for almost all other fields of scientific inquiry, even in the case of the so-called “hard” or natural sciences at the times of their beginning. Kuhn (1970) stipulates, “These debates have parallels in the pre-paradigm periods of fields that are today unhesitatingly labeled science” (p. 160).

True, one can hardly accuse communication sciences today in dominating the field with one single paradigm (a requirement for a science according to Kuhn). In fact, varieties of approaches, often even contradictory to each other, exist and prosper. Today one will hardly find an article in a geographic journal based on the “flat Earth” paradigm or a chemistry article based on the phlogistic paradigm, yet in communication journals one can find agenda-setting, cultivation, uses and gratifications, the spiral of silence and many others – sometimes, even in the same issue.

Kuhn’s paradigm shift does not seem to occur in the communication field. Quite the opposite, multiple incompatible paradigms exist simultaneously and produce prolific research. Even more, the shift of paradigm in the natural sciences does not only change the dominant theory, it changes the vocabulary of scientists, the questions asked, and the methods used for this whole area of science. In communication sciences, however, a scholar pursuing the research of uses and gratifications is probably more distant from a communication scholar pursuing the agenda-setting approach than from a scholar of another science, a psychology. Kuhn (1970) concludes,

The student in any one of these disciplines [social sciences] is constantly made aware of the immense variety of problems that the members of his future group have, in the course of time, attempted to solve. Even more important, he has constantly before him a number of competing and incommensurable solutions to these problems, solutions that he must ultimately evaluate for himself. (p. 165)

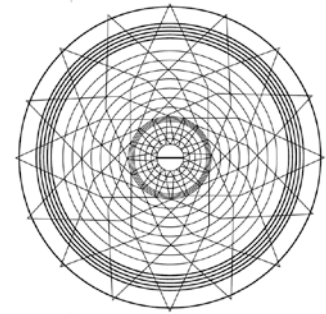
Thus, communication scholars have to approach the science without the guidance of a dominant paradigm and consequently, such scholars have to make their own decisions on what problems to choose, what methods to use, and what theories to turn to for an explanation. It is not free will in its most liberal meaning, because certainly the previous background of the scholar to a large extent has already made all the choices for him or her, yet it is not the natural sciences’ paradigmatic preposition of how, where, and why the science should move under the current dominant paradigm, the so-called “puzzle-solving” activity where all the pieces are given, the rules are set, and the desired outcome is known from the very beginning (Kuhn, 1970).

The way social sciences, in general, and communication sciences, in particular, are practiced at a micro level, however, is typically quite similar to the natural sciences. Communication is not a science in Kuhn’s view because there is no single dominant paradigm controlling and guiding all the research in this field; yet, communication is practiced like a natural science because a scholar nevertheless selects a certain

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paradigm for his or her own research to guide individual problem selection, scientific vocabulary, methods, and essentially conclusions. Thus, each particular research in communication becomes a science, an art of “puzzle solving” because it has the same strict rules and restrictions of what counts as “the admissible solutions” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 39) in the case of natural sciences.

Yet, the overall communication field does not have such an overarching paradigm with a certain predetermined solution and thus every scholar has the liberty to pursue studies in uses and gratifications, or agenda setting, or the spiral of silence. And, once again, this situation is not unique to communications, as centuries ago, today’s natural sciences were born out of conflicting paradigms: this is how from one philosophy medicine, geometry, chemistry, physics, and etc. developed.

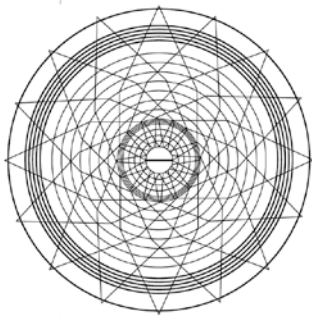
Thus, nowadays communication may be not a single science, but a combination of sciences, where a variety of approaches are allowed for implementation, trying to grow their own knowledge base and embracing their first dominant paradigm that might spur this approach one day into a separate science. Thus, communication science, today, as Kuhn (1970) rightly observed, does present a variety of possible solutions that each scholar evaluates for him or herself. Merton (1957) expressed a similar idea when he wrote that there are “centuries of cumulating scientific research” (p. 87) between social sciences and natural sciences. It does not mean that natural sciences are any better at explaining their phenomena in comparison with communication or any other social sciences. In fact, chemistry is not capable of answering all the questions about matter – physics, biology, geology add invaluable perspectives to this discussion. However, these perspectives do not have a place in chemistry because the questions they ask and the answers they find do not have anything to do with the modern chemistry paradigm. Schramm (1963) similarly contrasted communication with traditional sciences and called communication “an academic crossroad” (p. 2) where a variety of approaches meet.

IS COMMUNICATION DISTINGUISHABLE FROM OTHER SCIENCES?

If we agree that today’s communication science, in fact, consists of many competing sciences with incompatible paradigms and ways of looking at reality, one might question what warrants merging them together into the communication discipline or even what warrants distinguishing them altogether from other sciences?

In fact, in order to distinguish between communication sciences and other sciences one must find what unites all communication disciplines together and, at the same time, what fundamentally separates them from all other sciences. The answer might lie in the ontology of the objects under investigation.

Ontology is the theory of objects and their ties. It attempts to establish criteria for distinguishing various types of objects, such as concrete and abstract, existent and non-existent, real and ideal, independent and dependent, as well as their ties between each other (Corazzon, 2003). Natural sciences, on the one hand, and communication



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sciences, on the other, have essentially different levels of establishing the abstractness, existence, and reality of their objects. Such incompatibility resides in the focus of natural sciences on an object, while communication's target is on the meaning of this object. In other words, while natural sciences might study the chemical, physical, geographical and other characteristics of a piece of paper, communication sciences study the meaning of its physical, chemical, geographical and similar characteristics.

One might also consider the transmissibility of an object under investigation. In fact, the objects of natural sciences can be passed around; in the process such objects leave one's hands and appear in another person's hands. For example, one can take a newspaper and then pass it to another person – the newspaper will leave the hands of the first person and appear in the hands of another person. The situation is essentially different if studied from the perspective of communication sciences. It is impossible to literally pass on an object of communication. In fact, the meaning of an article in the very same paper, when re-told to another person, does not leave the first person's head, it stays with this person even after being completely repeated two, five or a hundred times. At the same time, it does not arrive to the second person either. The second person, while listening to the story, based on own frames of references, listening abilities, interfering noises and so on, creates in his or her mind her or his own version of the story that might be close or far away from the original in the paper or the one being re-told. In other words, instead of sharing the meaning, when meaning decreases in one place and increases in the other, there is a process of creating the meaning on both ends. One actualises information out of memory and personally interprets it already, thus creating new meaning; the other person, while listening, also creates an individual meaning, connecting the story with own background.

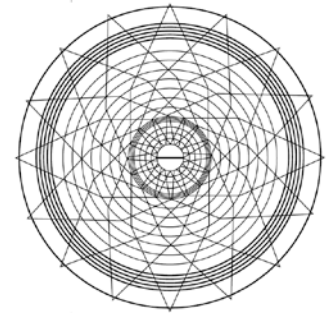
Of course not all objects can literally be passed around; in addition sciences study processes, as well as objects. Yet, the point still stands, as communication perceives the same objects and processes differently in terms of the meaning they produce, not as objects or processes, but as information.

Nicholas Negroponte (1995) called the attention of communication scholars to the fact that the communication discipline should view its objects not in terms of their material worth (atoms) but in terms of their informational worth (bits). Upon developing his suggestion, one can conclude what contrasts natural sciences and communication sciences. Traditional natural sciences study material worth (atoms), while communication sciences focus on the informational worth (bits) of the same objects. Such dichotomy provides a clear distinction between so-called "hard" natural sciences and communication sciences.

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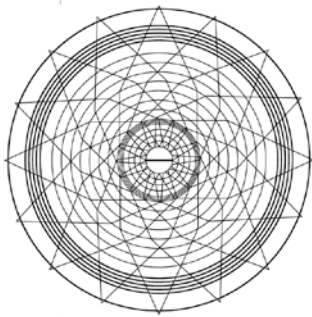


THE SCIENCE OF COMMUNICATION

In conclusion, communication does not meet one of Kuhn's key criteria of science – namely the presence of a dominant paradigm. In fact, many incompatible paradigms co-exist in the field with their own vocabularies, methods, sets of problems, and so on. This competition of incompatible paradigms in communication research today resembles the philosophical dilemmas of sciences centuries ago; the objects under investigation are, however, essentially different – it is the informational meaning rather than the material worth of an object. Yet, such meaning, when studying a human being for example, can be derived from the so-called “human nature” given by an eternal world of ideas or can be created by the real experiences through the actions and choices of human-beings. The dilemma of Plato (1987) and Aristotle (1959) transforms into the dilemma of Kant (1933) and Sartre (1962), as it transitions from material objects to the meanings created.

The absence of a dominant paradigm in communication science leads to an important requirement for scholars pursuing communication sciences – the requirement to state the paradigm of their research and the dominant ideology of their studies because the conclusions of the study are built upon the underlying paradigm of the research. In fact, universal and certain regularities of the covering laws paradigm will likely yield quite different conclusions from the free-will inspired human actions perspective, or from the system perspective's broad approach to multiple levels of reality introduced by Socrates (for an overview of communication paradigms, see Infante et al., 2003). With the scholar stating his or her paradigm of the research, it would expose the strengths and weaknesses of the underlying assumptions of such a study and allow the academic world to evaluate such a research from the relevant standpoint of an accumulated body of knowledge.

The academic freedom in the communication domain at the same time calls for creativity in introducing new approaches. As during the early years of science, scholars should in Popper's words (1965) “jump to conclusions”, thus coming up with hypotheses often after one or two observations. This leads to the intellectual variety and co-existence of a plethora of often incompatible theoretical alternatives. The communication should not be afraid to grow its own Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Epicurus and etc. The repeated tests, observations, and refutations transform some of these theoretical approaches into paradigms and into new sciences within the domain of communication sciences. Other hypotheses will stay as anecdotes forever or until the shifts in the material world (in human biology, in environment, in socio-political establishment) would warrant their review and perhaps the further development thereof.



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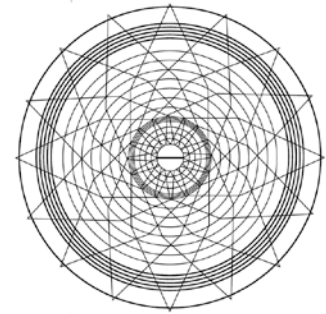
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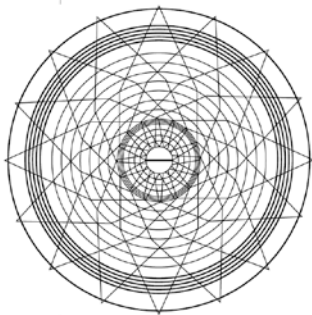
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НАУКИ О КОММУНИКАЦИИ

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Аннотация:

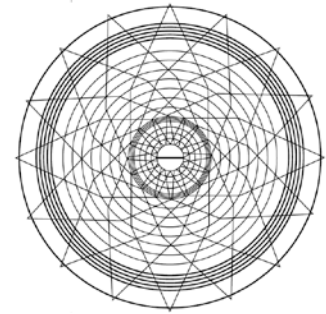
Данная статья представляет собой анализ места наук о коммуникации в традиционном научном поле, а также предлагает подход к идентификации того научного аппарата, который объединяет все науки о коммуникации и отличает их от других научных дисциплин – другими словами, что делает науки о коммуникации неповторимыми в научном поле. В статье продемонстрировано, что науки о коммуникации онтологически отличимы от других научных дисциплин, на чем они фокусируются и что является объектом и предметом наук о коммуникации.

Автор начинает свою статью с актуального на данном этапе развития науки вопроса о том, можно ли считать коммуникацию наукой, и приводит свою точку зрения на этот вопрос, опираясь на работы теоретиков и основоположников науки о коммуникации. Проводя историю науки от древнегреческих мыслителей, Аристотеля и Платона, автор статьи обосновывает свое определение объекта и предмета коммуникации как науки.

Ключевые слова: наука о коммуникации, теория коммуникация, теория и практика, задачи коммуникации как науки, предмет науки о коммуникации

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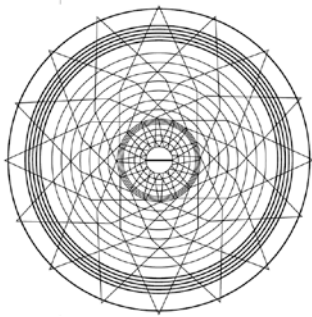
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