A FIRST LOOK AT
COMMUNICATION THEORY

The following document is an **archived chapter**
from a previous edition of
A First Look at Communication Theory
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Talk About Communication

Communication is a hard term to define. Most definitions probably say more about the author than they do about the nature of communication.

Consider, for example, the different views of two theorists you will read about in the Verbal Messages section. Engineer Claude Shannon takes a scientific approach: "Communication is the transmission and reception of information."[1] Philosopher I. A. Richards worked from a humanistic perspective: "Communication is the generation of meaning."[2] Although not contradictory, neither definition speaks to the concerns that are voiced by the other theorist.

Because the field of communication embraces both scientific and humanistic views of the world, I choose to adopt a definition that doesn't favor one approach over the other. I like the definition given by Lawrence Frey, Carl Botan, Paul Friedman, and Gary Kreps in their research methods text. These writers define communication in a way that describes the essence of the process without being biased against any particular way of examining the subject:

> Communication is the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning.[3]

This broad definition regards communication as an intentional activity, while not ruling out accidental outcomes. It gives equal weight to messages and meanings and opens the door for studying both content and relationships. The limits of the field are set sufficiently wide by this definition to include verbal and nonverbal symbols. In other words, the definition describes what communication scholars have really studied.

Folk wisdom suggests that we don't know who we are unless we know where we've been. We need to grasp a bit of our field's history before we can understand what the theorists in this book are trying to accomplish. The rest of this chapter provides that historical backdrop.

The first line of the song "Time," sung by the Alan Parsons Project, declares that "Time keeps flowing like a river."[4] Because a single river may contain many tributaries and more than one current, this stream-of-events metaphor captures nicely the history of communication theory and research. Chapter 1

focused on the twin currents of science and humanism. These diverse viewpoints surfaced in communication studies early in the 1900s, and the arts and sciences have ebbed and flowed within the discipline ever since.

All history is an interpretation of past events. I've identified seven significant historical periods of communication theory, research, and instruction during this century—a time in which the flow of communication study has swelled from a trickle to a flood (see page 29). But don't be surprised when you see that the dates for the seven periods often overlap. Like the stages of a river's course, these periods are hard to separate.

THE EARLY YEARS (1900–1950): THE RISE OF RHETORIC

In the early 1900s, college speech teachers were members of English departments. Speech teachers stressed oral performance and were often looked down upon as "poor cousins" by those who studied and taught literature. In an attempt to gain respect and to carve out an academic discipline for themselves, a small group of speech teachers broke away from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1914 and formed the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. (Even teachers of speech had a tough time pronouncing the acronym, NAATPS.) The name of the organization was later changed to the Speech Association of America (SAA). Although some speech teachers continued to occupy back offices in English departments, by 1935 more than 200 American college and university catalogues listed a separate department of speech.

The first issue of this new discipline's journal, the *Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*, called for NAATPS members to have "a sufficiently scientific frame of mind,"[5] and a subsequent article stated that the main goal of the organization was to help members "undertake scientific investigation to discuss true answers to certain questions."[6] But for most speech professionals, this early tip of

the hat to science seems to have been a concern for academic respectability within the university rather than a drive to discover laws of oral effectiveness. Other than the specialized study of speech disorders, such as stuttering and vocal strain, the scientific perspective didn't have a major impact on the field until after World War II.

During these early years, speech departments offered courses that gave practical advice to those trying to influence audiences through public address, oral interpretation of literature, radio announcing, drama, debate, and round-table discussion. Teachers drew on a body of wisdom from Greek and Roman times—the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian were the authoritative sources for instruction in public address.

As for scholarly research, a 1925 essay by Herbert Wichelns of Cornell University established rhetorical criticism as *the* appropriate theoretical activity of the field. He wrote that unlike the critical study of literature, the analysis of public address

> is not concerned with permanence, nor yet with beauty. It is concerned with effect. It regards a speech as a communication to a specific audience, and holds its business to be the analysis and appreciation of the orator's method of imparting his ideas to his hearers.[7]

Wichelns's work established Aristotle's categories of logical, emotional, and ethical appeals as the standard way to evaluate persuasive discourse. This neo-Aristotelian method of speech criticism dominated the field for the next few decades. Rhetoric was an *art*, and for the majority of speech teachers, who had been schooled in the humanities, the scientific study of public address with its quantitative methodology seemed silly and trite. As for the rhetorical analysis of radio, film, or television, these media were dismissed as forms of entertainment that didn't have the importance of a formal political address or the public discussion of issues.

COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL SCIENCE (1930–1960): MEDIA EFFECTS

Prior to World War II, few scholars referred to their study as "communication research." Those who did used the term to describe the scientific study of media effects and worked out of departments of sociology, psychology, political science, and journalism rather than within the field of speech. Rhetoricians ignored the new mass communication technologies of film, radio, and television, dismissing them as mere entertainment. But the armed conflict across two oceans created an urgent need to find effective ways to inform, influence, and inspire maximum citizen support for the war effort.

Leading social scientists from around the country converged on Washington in a cooperative attempt to discover how broadcast messages affected listeners. In his 1963 book, *The Science of Human Communication*, Wilbur Schramm, Director of the Stanford Institute for Communication Research, referred to four of these men as the "founding fathers" of communication research.[8] Each man

took a behavioral science approach to the effects of persuasive messages on mass audiences.

Political scientist Harold Lasswell analyzed the content of Nazi propaganda to determine why it had a powerful effect on many who heard it. He broke the communication process into five component parts: *Who* says *what* through *which channel*, to *whom*, with *what effect*.

Kurt Lewin was a social psychologist who had escaped Hitler's holocaust. His strong aversion to authoritarian leadership led him to investigate prejudice and the way groups influence the decisions of individual members.

Sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld founded the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University as a way to attract business and government funding. He tested his current theories on any marketing problem posed by his clients. His Radio Research Project pioneered innovative survey and focus-group techniques to capture the emotional impact of broadcasting.

Through his Yale attitude change studies, experimental psychologist Carl Hovland tested the persuasive effects of source credibility (the believability of a speaker) and the order of arguments within a message. Working for the Army during the war, Hovland analyzed the effect of *Why We Fight* training films on soldier morale.

In a 1959 article entitled "The State of Communication Research," University of Chicago social scientist Bernard Berelson declared that communication research was "withering away."[9] He based this gloomy conclusion on the fact that all the founding fathers Schramm identified had either retired, died, or abandoned communication research. Berelson's assessment proved overly pessimistic, mainly because of Schramm's tireless efforts. Following his wartime experience, in which he helped draft President Franklin Roosevelt's famous fireside chats, Schramm set out to create a "crossroads discipline" of communication to complement the five established social sciences of psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and anthropology.

Schramm brought a rich mix of talents and experience to his endeavor. Trained in English, he was an accomplished journalist, wrote stories for the *Saturday Evening Post*, played the flute in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, flew an airplane, and was even offered a contract to play AAA baseball. By the end of the 1960s Schramm had created the first doctoral program in mass communication (University of Iowa), established the Institute of Communication Research along the lines of Lazarsfeld's model (University of Illinois), and gained stature for communication studies by establishing a similar program at one of the prestigious private universities—Stanford.

Many communication scholars regard Schramm as the true founder of the field, and some suggest that he created a "founding fathers" myth to borrow the credibility of respected social scientists.[10] Whatever the case, it is clear that Schramm trained the first generation of empirically oriented communication researchers while avoiding any dialogue with existent departments of speech based in the humanities. This lack of contact set a pattern for the division between the rhetorical arts and behavioral sciences within the field, and also in-

hibited any blending of interest in interpersonal and mass communication study. Despite Schramm's indifference to the broader field, a number of his students joined speech department faculties and introduced their scientific methodologies and research agendas. Because of these social scientists, the discipline would never be the same.

THE EMPIRICAL REVOLUTION (1950–1970): THEORY IN A TEST TUBE

Speech departments in the 1950s continued to promote the ancient rhetorical wisdom that persuasive discourse was a matter of an ethical speaker using logical arguments—"the good man speaking well."[11] But younger faculty with training in the social sciences were no longer willing to accept this "truth" by faith. Armed with a scientific skepticism and new methods to assess attitudes, they put rhetorical principles to the test.

Aristotle, for example, wrote that *ethos* was a combination of a speaker's intelligence, character, and goodwill toward the audience. Empirically oriented speech researchers subsequently discovered that audience rankings of "communicator credibility" did indeed include factors of competence (intelligence) and trustworthiness (character).[12] But they found no evidence that audiences regarded goodwill or positive intentions as traits separate from character.

Scholars interested in this kind of study adopted the media-effects term *communication research* to distinguish their work from the historical-critical textual analysis of rhetoricians. In 1950 a group of communication researchers founded what is now the International Communication Association (ICA) as a science-based professional organization to rival the SAA, which was grounded in the humanities. Traditional speech teachers of this era often accused communication researchers of succumbing to "the law of the hammer." This was a not-so-subtle dig at those who would pound away with newly acquired statistical tools no matter what the job required.

But irony did little to slow the radical transformation within the communication discipline. The change was undoubtedly speeded up by Shannon and Weaver's linear model of communication, which appeared at the beginning of this period (see Chapter 4). David Berlo, who wrote the leading communication textbook of the 1960s, reduced that model to four simple parts.[13]

<div align="center">Source-Message-Channel-Receiver</div>

His SMCR model provided a common vocabulary and a standard way to view the communication process.

The empiricists continued to borrow their core ideas from other disciplines—especially social psychology. Indeed, five of the thirty-three communication theories in this book come from that specialized branch of psychology. Their common methodology and unity of world view gave social scientists in the communication field a greater impact than their numbers alone would indicate. In 1969, the SAA changed its name to the Speech Communication Association (SCA). The term *communication* in the title was tacit evidence that the

scientific approach now dominated the discipline. At the start of the 1960s few departments that taught speech had the word *communication* as part of their title. By the mid 1970s there were few that didn't.

THE TURBULENT SIXTIES (1960–1970): A LAUNCHING PAD FOR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

If time is like a river flowing through the field of communication, the decade of the 1960s was a ten-year stretch of white-water rapids. For America, it was the time of civil rights confrontations, urban riots, U.S. involvement in Vietnam, campus sit-ins, the coming of the Beatles, the hippie movement, the sexual revolution, the drug culture, and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Bobby, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. The unrest throughout the country was reflected in departments of speech and communication. Nowhere was the turbulence felt more than in the rocky transition from a focus on public address to a concentration on interpersonal communication.

In 1960, most members of the Speech Association of America still thought of speech as a platform art. Course titles in academic departments mirrored this mental image—Public Address, Oral Interpretation, Argumentation and Debate, Persuasion, History of American Public Address, and Classical Rhetoric. Even the study of small-group communication centered on discussion and decision making in the context of a structured meeting. Collegewide service courses were set up to improve message organization, reduce speech fright, and eliminate distracting *and ah's* and *you know's* from speakers' delivery.

For many professors and students, however, the niceties of formal public speaking seemed irrelevant in light of the raw struggle for power taking place on the streets outside the classroom. After all, who gave well-reasoned speeches any more? Who would listen? By 1970, most faculty regarded public address as outdated, and the shape of communication departments was radically altered. Consider the following evidence:

> At many schools, interpersonal communication replaced public speaking as the required course for all students. The curriculum centered on dyadic interactions that are characterized by a mutual awareness of the individuality of the others.

> Leading professors no longer taught public speaking courses. They focused instead on nonverbal communication, trust building, self-disclosure, conflict resolution, and other interpersonal issues. Behavioral scientists did the research, while humanists wrote the textbooks. Neither group seemed excited about public address.

> The encounter group movement had a strong influence on the way group courses were taught. Known also as "sensitivity training" or "humanistic psychology," the movement promoted an open and honest sharing of feelings between members and encouraged them to disregard social conventions that might inhibit gut-level expression.

Persuasion became a dirty word. The prevailing do-your-own-thing attitude in society sanctioned an individualism that left little room for corporate responsibility or conscious attempts to change another person's behavior.

The focus of communication ethics switched from telling the truth to loyalty to your communication partner. *What* was said became secondary to *how* it was said and to the way it *affected* others. Relationships were more important than message content.

The popularity of concentrations within communication departments changed significantly. Interpersonal and media communication were hot. Oral interpretation, public address, and its history were not. Voice science and drama had a life of their own and often broke away and formed separate departments. Contrary to the expectation of empiricists who were riding high, however, rhetoric did not disappear. After decades of neo-Aristotelian sameness, new methods of rhetorical analysis emerged which guaranteed that rhetoric would not only survive, but thrive.

THE NEW RHETORICS (1965–1980)

A 1965 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* contained an article that used Aristotle's categories of *logos, pathos,* and *ethos* to analyze the relationship between message arguments and figures of speech in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England.[14] This historical-critical study is remarkable today only as a typical example of speech scholarship from 1925 to 1965. Rhetoricians were apparently locked into a single method of analyzing a text. What had once been considered mainstream research was now in danger of being relegated to the backwaters of the discipline.

That same year, Edward Black's book *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study of Method* launched a rebellion against traditional rhetorical scholarship by advocating multiple approaches to analyzing speech events.[15] Douglas Ehninger was only one of many scholars who was quick to proclaim the demise of rhetorical orthodoxy:

> If Wichelns' landmark essay of 1925 gave neo-Aristoteleanism its birth, this book published exactly 40 years later may well deal the school its death blow.[16]

As it turned out, he was wrong. Aristotle's categories continue to offer a helpful way to analyze a message, the speaker who gives it, and the audience that hears it. (See Chapter 23.) Yet a host of new approaches came to prominence soon after Black's call for new rhetorics.

Observing the protest movements of the 1960s, rhetorical critics reached the same conclusion as behavioral scientists—that the impact of public marches and sit-ins had little to do with carefully crafted speeches or well-reasoned arguments. The sheer numbers of demonstrators and their militant behavior spoke louder than any phrase or figure of speech. Articles on "The Rhetoric of Black Power," "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," and other "rhetoric of . . ." studies began to appear in communication journals.[17]

Many humanists took offense at the nonartistic methods demonstrators used to capture the public's attention. There is nothing particularly subtle about a raised fist, a shouted obscenity, or the takeover of a public building. But if rhetoric was truly an effort "to discover all possible means of persuasion,"[18] scholars in the field decided they could no longer ignore the coercive techniques of social agitation and the way in which nonverbal behavior communicates.

The same logic applied to the influence of television, film, and popular music. Originally dismissed as "mere entertainment," the mass media were obviously shaping popular culture. English professor Marshall McLuhan captured public attention with his claim that the content of television was almost irrelevant (see Chapter 26). "The medium is the message," he announced, and thousands of students set out to investigate his assertion. Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *logos, pathos*, and *ethos* seemed pale in comparison with the excitement of taking part in a media revolution.

Until the late 1970s, most U.S. speech communication professionals were unaware of European thinking on the connection between communication and culture. Although British, French, Italian, and German scholars might differ on details, most offered a Marxist analysis of the media's role in shaping societal values.

Known as "critical theorists," these humanistic philosophers and sociologists were especially critical of American empirical researchers who claimed to be doing objective science. Critical theorists scoffed at a media research establishment that professed to be neutral, but always ended up serving those who held political and economic power. By the end of this period, European critical theory had crossed the Atlantic and provided U.S. rhetoricians with fresh ammunition for periodic clashes with social scientists.

THE HUNT FOR A UNIVERSAL MODEL (1970–1980)

While rhetoricians were diversifying in the 1970s, communication scientists were trying to consolidate. After two decades of empirical research, they could boast of scant new knowledge about the process of communication. Many suspected that the absence of a scientific breakthrough was due to the lack of a single grand theory that was needed to focus research efforts.

Each communication interest group had isolated and studied separate variables that members thought crucial to the process of communication. For example, public address researchers tried to find causes and cures for speech anxiety. Group dynamics investigators centered on traits and styles of leadership. Mass communication scholars focused on the effects of television violence. Persuasion researchers sought the different factors of source credibility, and the new area of interpersonal communication was all over the conceptual map with studies of self-disclosure, self-esteem, trust, nonverbal signals, conflict resolution, and much more. There was little discipline within the discipline.

In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn argues that a universal paradigm or model is the mark of a mature science.[19] Social scientists in communication departments were painfully aware that they hadn't achieved that status. Although successfully redefining the field as "communication" and assuming leadership in the newly titled departments, they still couldn't claim a unifying theory or approach that would guarantee academic respectability among their colleagues in departments of psychology or physics. So throughout the decade of the 1970s, empiricists pursued the dream of a universally accepted communication model.

Ultimately they failed, but it wasn't for lack of trying. At the same SAA-sponsored summit conference that prompted the change in the organization's name, communication scholars sought to define the central research focus of the discipline. They agreed that "spoken symbolic interaction" was their object of study, and calls for journal articles and convention papers over the next decade stressed a preference for message-oriented inquiry.

In an attempt to chart the factors that affect message creation and interpretation, textbook writers of the 1970s offered pictorial models of the communication process, each more complex than the one that came before. The various illustrations looked like Monopoly boards, bedsprings, whirlpools, schematic drawings of electrical circuits, diagrams of football plays, family trees, furnace-thermostat feedback loops, splitting amoebas, Rubic cubes, ladders, hydraulic plumbing, and wheels within wheels. As intriguing as they were, no one model generated a consensus as *the* paradigm of the communication process.

The entire 1977 spring issue of *Communication Quarterly* featured a debate among advocates of three types of theory—laws, rules, and systems. From Chapter 1 you already know that *covering laws* are the goal of science and that *interpretive rules* are the product of a humanistic approach. An *open systems* approach doesn't fit neatly into either camp.

Systems theory refuses to treat any conversation as an isolated event. Theorists working with this model see a human communication system as a set of interdependent people who work together to adapt to a changing environment. Systems theorists differ from rules theorists in that they play down the role of individuals and concentrate on patterns of relationships within the entire system. They depart from a laws approach in that they regard the communication event as greater than the sum of its parts.

Debate as a cocurricular activity has a long and proud tradition of excellence in our field. Many public figures point to their collegiate debate training as superb preparation for critical analysis and thinking on their feet. But debaters rarely credit their opponents' arguments, and spectators are seldom swayed by what they hear. So it was with the theoretical debates of the 1970s. Champions of systems, rules, and laws took potshots at each other, while bystanders caught in the cross fire decided that no single way of viewing communication was so compelling that they should become a true believer and join the fray. Perhaps a single paradigm wasn't really necessary. Over time, the quest for a universal model of communication lost much of its steam.

FERMENT IN THE FIELD (1980–PRESENT)

The title for this section comes from a special 1983 issue of the *Journal of Communication* devoted to taking stock of the discipline. Thirty-five separate articles offered perspectives on the health of communication scholarship. The term *ferment* captures the mix of creative energy and stressful agitation that writers spotted then, and that continues to mark the field today.[20]

On the positive side, college and university communication departments are more numerous than ever before—about two thousand in the United States alone. They often boast more majors and greater course enrollments than any other department on campus. Twenty-five years ago students began to flock to courses in interpersonal and mass communication, and growth continued through new interest in organizational communication and the applied skills of leadership, conflict negotiation, advertising, and public relations. In 1970, there were 11,000 seniors graduated as communication majors; by 1990 the annual rate had risen to over 50,000. During the same two decades, the number of sociology graduates fell from 36,000 to 14,000 per year.

Communication researchers sought to keep pace with an expanding field. As a result, students can now find research summaries in handbooks of interpersonal communication, organizational communication, and communication science, or consult entries in the four-volume *Encyclopedia of Communications*. They can also locate journal articles on specific interests in *Communication Theory, Language and Social Interaction*, and the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*—all launched since the *Ferment* review appeared. Taken as a whole, the contents of these publications suggest five recent trends in communication study:

1. Increasing interest in interpretive research—especially cultural studies and feminist critiques that seek to unmask and redress power imbalances.

2. More studies using ethnographic methods. For example, media analysts are now paying less attention to the content of television messages and focusing more on how the messages are interpreted by individual viewers.

3. Attempts to penetrate the "black box" of the mind by modeling the mental structures and cognitive processes that guide communication behavior.

4. Interpersonal scholarship converging on the study of personal relationships. Persuasion and group behavior headed the agenda in the 1960s and 1970s; today the focus is on romance, friendship, and family.

5. Wildly diverse interests and research agendas within the field of communication. Once hailed as a strength because it guaranteed success at the registrar's desk, this pluralism now strikes many as evidence that there is no discipline within the discipline. *Fragmentation* has replaced *ferment* as a label for communication studies in the 1990s.
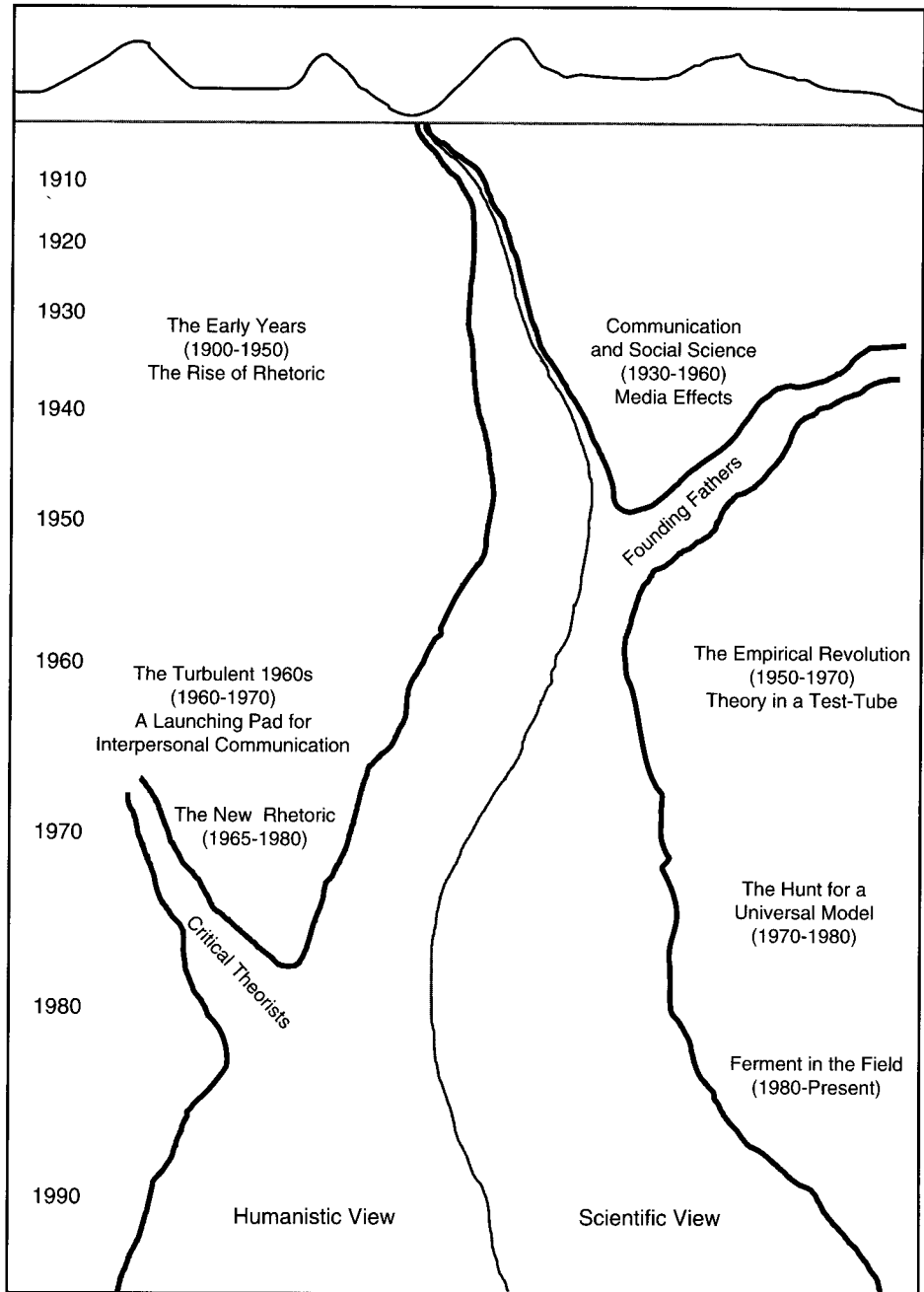
FIGURE 2.1
Communication Theory and Research—The Flow of History

Lack of cohesion within the field makes it difficult for those outside the field to understand the nature of communication study. At a time when money for education is tight, our place at the academy is at risk if college deans are looking for unifying theory or agreed-upon methods of research. Legitimacy may be further threatened when departments adopt a cafeteria approach to learning that doesn't require students to master a common core of knowledge.[21] "No one knows who we are," is a lament sometimes heard when communication professors gather together. Yet we often duck the nagging question "Do *we* know who we are?" Your current study of communication theory is the optimal time for you to craft a satisfying answer to that question of scholastic self-identity.

At the start of this historical overview, I compared communication scholarship in the twentieth century to a river with twin currents representing the arts and sciences. Figure 2.1 illustrates the stages and events that punctuate that flow. Note that as the study of communication has swelled from a trickle to a broad river, the relative strengths of scientific and humanistic inquiry have varied greatly from past to present. With the increase of critical and ethnographic analysis in the last decade, the two distinct approaches of the humanities and social sciences are now roughly equal in the amount of interest they generate. But I've drawn the arts and sciences separate in this depiction of communication theory and research over the years, because that's the way it has tended to be. Only on rare occasions have the two currents of study actually blended together.

The editors of the *Handbook of Rhetoric and Communication* are forced to conclude:

> In the present state of knowledge we cannot organize research and theory concerning rhetoric and communication within any single framework.[22]

This tension between behavioral scientists and rhetoricians continues to be a chief cause for ferment and fragmentation in the field.

Since communication research and rhetorical study differ so markedly and yet both hold an important place within our discipline, it's crucial for us to understand how to evaluate both kinds of theory. Applying the standards of science to rhetorical theory would be just as unfair as judging empirically grounded theory by artistic criteria. In Chapter 3, I will explore the basic ways you can identify good theory in each category. Surprisingly, you may discover several points of contact that give hope that the artistic and scientific currents within the field of communication sometimes flow downriver at the same pace, and may increasingly merge.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1.   At the start of the chapter *communication* was defined as "the management of messages for the purpose of creating meaning." How does this definition embrace the concerns of both the *arts* and *sciences*?

2. The *boundaries of the discipline* seem to be so fluid that it's hard to say what communication scholars do *not* study. Which human thoughts or activities would you exclude from communication research?

3. From your perspective, has there been a turning point in the history of the speech communication field that has special significance?

4. Think of yourself as rowing a boat on the river depicted in Figure 2.1. What part of the river would your interest in communication lead you to occupy?

A SECOND LOOK

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