problems of our current political culture? About the barriers to Palestinian-Israeli dialogue? Our theoretical traditions are tools for understand our environment, putting communicative phenomena in the center of our analyses. Fundamentally, this communicational perspective is our added value, the cultural difference we should want to make as a discipline

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Communication as a Distinct Mode of Explanation Makes a Difference

Matt Koschmann

As a communication scholar, I find myself living within a tension: The practice of communication is widely recognized as a critical factor in countless social contexts, yet the academic study of communication is often trivialized and belittled (captured poignantly in a classic *Simpsons* television episode that refers to the "phony major" of an undergraduate communication student). Many people see communication as important, but not necessarily warranting scholarly attention. It is assumed that with enough experience and practice one can figure out what needs to be known about communication. The school of hard knocks is preferred over the laboratory or field.

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Perhaps one thing driving this tension is that communication is seen by many inside and out of the academy as a particular social practice that happens within frameworks better understood by other academic disciplines. For example, interpersonal communication may be seen as a practical skill shaped by larger psychological or biological forces; intercultural communication may be viewed as the surface-level experience of deeper sociological factors; and organizational communication may be perceived as simply the output of broader economic and political concerns. Therefore if one really wants to understand communication, one should study these other topics (psychology, sociology, economics, etc.) instead. How, then, can communication scholarship make a difference in a world that does not necessarily recognize the intellectual merits of our craft?

The initial contributors to this forum suggested a number of ways in which the difference-making capacity of communication scholarship can be assessed. Condit (2008) advocated improving communication practice in the world, Frey (2009) argued for translation and intervention, Hummert (2009) talked about promoting beneficial outcomes and changing communication behavior, and Seeger (2008) focused on improving peoples' lives and solving problems. I suggest an additional way that communication scholarship can make a difference: When members of our discipline become known in scholarly circles for offering distinctively communicative explanations for important societal phenomena, and when these communicative explanations prove valuable for practitioners.

To date, much of our discipline sees communication as a unit of analysis; specifically, as instances of talk and message exchange that happen in certain contexts. This perspective leads communication scholars to focus on different "types" of communication: superior–subordinate communication, instructional communication, family communication, crisis communication, and so forth. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, and, in fact, it has led to a wealth of knowledge, as the previous forum authors noted. However, this line of work is also predominantly underwritten by theoretical perspectives from outside the field of communication (Condit, 2008). If communication scholars continue on this path, we will document more and more types of communication, but implicitly demonstrate that the real intellectual work of studying communication is best done in other disciplines.

An alternative approach would be to start with communication as a distinct mode of explanation (see Deetz, 2009). Rather than developing psychological or sociological theories of differnt communication types, the goal would be to develop communicative explanations for various social phenomena. Hence, in addition to tracking down more examples of people talking and exchanging messages in new contexts, scholars should be creating distinctively communicative understandings of social phenomena and spelling out the relevant implications of those understandings for theory and practice. The question, then, is whether or not a communicative explanation for a given phenomenon actually makes a difference to both scholars and practitioners. Does a communicative explanation help to better understand the phenomenon under investigation? Does it help people to make better decisions or to

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lead more meaningful lives? Does a communicative perspective offer novel explanations or help us to ask better questions? Does it help us to solve problems in ways we could not from other perspectives? If these questions can be answered in the affirmative, communication scholarship is certainly making a difference.

One area where this shift to communicative explanations is beginning to happen is within the subfield of organizational communication. Early work in organizational communication was driven by functionalist assumptions about communication that were beholden to the broader economic and sociological theories that informed organizational studies. However, as organizational communication scholars embraced the linguistic turn in the social sciences and developed more interpretive frameworks to guide their scholarship (see Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983), they began moving toward more distinctively communicative explanations of organizational phenomena. Today, much of this work finds a home under a broad conceptual term called "communication-as-constitutive-of-organizing" (CCO; see Putnam & Nicotera, 2008). This line of thinking sees communication as the underlying constitutive force behind all organizational activities, structures, and processes. Rather than documenting instances of communication that happen to occur in organizational contexts, these scholars are developing distinctively communicative explanations of human organizing.

This research is still quite abstract and conceptual at this point; it has yet to show the big payoffs that make scholars in other disciplines and organizational practitioners pay attention. This will happen only when this line of thinking offers *better* accounts of organizational phenomena than existing perspectives, and when it helps organizational practitioners to make *better* decisions than they would from other perspectives. However, this is a more promising direction than merely recording various communication types that happen within organizations because it has the potential to demonstrate the unique value of communicative explanations and the distinctiveness of communication scholarship. Instead of just documenting further instances of communication in new organizational contexts, scholars will be showing the value of a communicative perspective in all areas of the human experience.

Other academic fields have taken this approach quite successfully. For instance, biologists do not just study biology but they offer biological explanations for many aspects of the natural world, philosophers do not just study philosophy but they offer philosophical explanations for many levels of human existence, and economists do not just study economies but they offer economic explanations for countless social phenomena.

In the same way, communication scholarship will make much more of a difference when it goes beyond seeing communication as merely a unit of analysis, defining ourselves solely based on what we study versus a broader explanatory framework. It will always be valuable to study particular instances of communication activity, but if this is all that communication scholars do, we will continually return to questions of whether or not communication scholarship makes a difference because we will always know in the back of our minds that other disciplines are doing the heavy lifting of our scholarship. However, if our research is grounded in distinctive qualities of communication and results in communication-specific explanations for important

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social phenomena, answers to questions about the difference that communication scholarship makes will become self-evident, and we might wonder why we ever asked the question in the first place.

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It Depends on Your Criteria

Michael W. Kramer

This year I can donate blood 4–6 times to the Red Cross potentially affecting 12–18 lives or to a nursing school study which may or may not help improve the quality of untold numbers of lives. Since I can only do one, how do I choose which one makes the bigger difference? Even within medical science, the choice depends on the criteria I use to define making a difference. Similarly, the answer to "has communication research made a difference" is that it depends on how you define making a difference. I consider several different criteria for defining "making a difference" through questions that suggest particular research paradigms or scholarly concerns. Some of these were suggested by the essays already published in the series and others were not. Depending on which criteria are used, the answers are quite different.

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