1.4: History of Organizational Communication

Learning Objectives

- Explain the three different ways the term “organizational communication” can be understood according to Stanley Deetz.
- Define the term “organizational communication” as it is used within this book.
- Identify some of the major historical events in the creation of the field of “organizational communication.”

Now that we’ve examined what we mean by “human communication” in this book, let’s switch gears and discuss the nature of “organizational communication.” To help us understand what is meant by the term “organizational communication,” we’ll explore differing ways of viewing the term and then a basic conceptual definition that we will use in this book.

Ways of Viewing Organizational Communication

Stanley Deetz argues that defining what is meant by the term “organizational communication” is only half the question. “A more interesting question is, ‘What do we see or what are we able to do if we think of organizational communication in one way versus another?’ Unlike a definition, the attempt here is not to get it right but to understand our choices.”

“Organizational Communication” as a Discipline

The first way the term “organizational communication" is commonly used is as a descriptor tool that refers to a specific sub-division of the communication field. However, organizational communication is not an academic area of study unique to the field of communication studies. Because organizational communication is a unique discipline there are courses, books, and degrees all associated with the study of organizational communication. According to Dennis K. Mumby and Cynthia Stohl, “A community of scholars constitutes a disciplinary matrix when they share a set of paradigmatic assumptions about the stud of a certain phenomenon.” Mumby, D., & Stohl, C. (1996). Disciplining organizational communication studies. Management Communication Quarterly, 10, 50–72, pg. 52. In essence, organizational communication is a discipline because people who study it share a common conception of the study of this thing called “organizational communication.” Mumby and Stohl go on to note that “This does not mean that there is a consensus on every issue, but rather that scholars see objects of study in similar ways, and use the same language game in describing these phenomena.” Mumby, D., & Stohl, C. (1996). Disciplining organizational communication studies. Management Communication Quarterly, 10, 50–72, pg. 52. In fact, you may find your teacher or even yourself disagreeing with our interpretation of certain aspects of organizational communication, which is very much a normal part of any academic discipline.

“Organizational Communication” as a Descriptor

The second way we can view the term “organizational communication” is as descriptor for what happens within organizations. Deetz explains, “to think of communication as a way to describe and explain organizations. In the same way that psychology, sociology, and economics can be thought of as capable of explaining organizations’ processes, communication might also be thought of as a distinct mode of explanation or way of thinking about organizations.” Deetz, S. (2001). Conceptual Foundations. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods (pp. 3–46). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pg. 5. As you will quickly see in this book, organizational communication as it has been studied in the past and continues to be studied today is a hybrid field, which means that people in a variety of different academic areas conduct research on the topic. People in anthropology, business, psychology, sociology, and other academic areas conduct research that is fundamentally about organizational communication. Communication scholars differ in how we approach organizational communication because our training is first, and foremost, in human communication, so we bring a unique history and set of tools to the stud of organizational communication that other scholars do not possess.

“Organizational Communication” as a Phenomenon

The final way one can view the term “organizational communication” is to view it as a specific phenomenon or set of phenomena that occurs within an organization. For example, when two employees get into a conflict at work, they are enacting organizational communication. When the chief financial officer of an organization is delivering a PowerPoint presentation on the latest quarterly earnings to the organization’s board of directors, he or she is engaging in organizational communication. The latest advertisement campaign an organization has created for the national media is another example of organizational communication.
A Conceptual Definition of “Organizational Communication”

The definition we will use for organizational communication in this book stems primarily out of the last of Deetz’s three views of “organizational communication.” Deetz, S. (2001). Conceptual Foundations. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (pp. 3–46). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. For the purposes of this book, we define organizational communication as the process whereby an organizational stakeholder (or group of stakeholders) attempts to stimulate meaning in the mind of another organizational stakeholder (or group of stakeholders) through intentional use of verbal, nonverbal, and/or mediated messages. You’ll notice the similarities between this definition and the one we provided earlier for human communication. Let’s break this definition down by exploring the primary unique factor in this definition, organizational stakeholders.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of Business Terms*, a stakeholder is “any party that has an interest in an organization. Stakeholders of a company include stockholders, bondholders, customers, suppliers, employees, and so forth.” Scott, D. L. (Ed.). (2009). *stakeholder*. In *The American heritage dictionary of business terms* (p. 503). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. As discussed in the Preface of this book, there are a range of different stakeholders that exist for an organization. Here is just a short list of some of the stakeholders within an organization: workers, managers, shareholders, etc… Every organization also has to be concerned with stakeholders who exist within the organization’s external environment: competitors, community members, governmental agencies, etc… Basically, every organization has a wide range of stakeholders that it must attend to in order to run itself smoothly.

A History of Organizational Communication

Instead of providing a long, drawn out history of the field of organizational communication as we know it today, we’ve provided you a brief timeline dating back to the 1750s when the Industrial Revolution began in the United Kingdom. The introduction of steam-powered machinery forever changed the way businesses operated and led to the eventual creation of the modern corporation. Table 1.3 is a summary of the major events in the history of organizational communication. This table is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but only a representative list of some of the major key-moments in the study of organizational communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1750</td>
<td>Industrial Revolution starts in the United Kingdom and quickly transforms the nature of business.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910, April</td>
<td>Harvard Business School becomes the first academic program to focus on the scholarship of business.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The first meeting of the Eastern Public Speaking Conference is held. The association changed itself to the Speech Association of the Eastern States in 1950 and then to the Eastern Communication Association in 1973.</td>
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1914 The National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking is formed and holds its first convention the following year. This association changed its names four times over the next hundred years: National Association of Teachers of Speech, 1923; Speech Association of America, 1946; Speech Communication Association, 1970; and National Communication Association, 1997.

1919 Edward L. Bernays and Doris Fleishman open the first public relations firm.

1929 William Phillips Sandford and Willard Hayes Yeager are the first speech scholars to publish a public speaking book aimed at business professionals titled Business and Professional Speaking.

1937 W. Charles Redding publishes an article titled “Speech and Human Relations” in the academic journal The Speaker. Redding is widely considered the father of organizational communication.

1938 Chester Barnard publishes The Functions of the Executive and argues that “The first function of the executive is to develop and maintain a system of communication” (p. 226).

1938 Paul F. Lazarsfeld publishes the first review of the discipline of communication based on his and others’ research at the Bureau of Applied Social Research and determines that communication could be broken into four categories: 1) who, 2) said what, 3) to whom, and 4) with what effect.

1941 Alexander R. Heron argues that successful communication with one’s employees is necessary for good business in his book Sharing Information with Employees.

1945 University of Denver holds the first graduate-level seminar in industrial communication.

1949 Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver publish The Mathematical Theory of Communication, which provides the first major model of human communication (source, message, receiver, noise).

1949 The first dissertation specifically in industrial communication was completed by Keith Davis in the department of business at Ohio State University. The title of the manuscript was “Channels of Personnel Communication within the Management Setting.”

1952 Ohio State University and the University of Nebraska offer the first Ph.D. degrees conferred by speech departments in industrial communication.

1953 Lee Thayer, a speech professor with an interest in communication in businesses, publishes Administrative Communication which is the first true textbook in organizational communication.


1964 W. Charles Redding and George A. Sanborn publish Business and Industrial Communication: A Source Book, which compiled copies of previously published articles on a wide range of organizational communication topics. The publication of this book is generally seen as the true start of the field of organizational communication.

1964 The first “Conference on Organizational Communication” is held at Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama. At the conference, Philip K. Tompkins reviews the state of organizational communication and divides the types of research into two categories: (1) informal and formal channels of communication and (2) superior-subordinate relationships. Tompkins’ presentation marks the official acceptance of the term “organizational communication.”

1967 Henry Voos publishes Organizational Communication: A Bibliography sponsored by the Office of Naval Research.
1968  Division IV, organizational communication, becomes an officially recognized group by NSCC, which became the International Communication Association in 1970.

1972  W. Charles Redding publishes his book *Communication with the Organization: An Interpretive Review of Theory and Research*. In this monograph he poses 10 basic postulates of organizational communication.

1973  The Academy of Management authorizes a new division within its association titled Organizational Communication.

1982  The *Western Journal of Communication* publishes a series of articles based out of a conference held in Alta, Utah, “The Summer Conference on Interpretive Approaches to the Study of Organization Communication.” This series of articles argues for the importance of incorporating interpretive methods in the study of organizational communication.

1983  Linda Putnam and Michael E. Pacanowsky publish *Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach*. This edited book further solidifies the importance of interpretive research methods in organizational communication.


1991  Wert-Gray, Center, Brashers, and Meyers publish an article titled “Research Topics and Methodological Orientations in Organizational Communication: A Decade in Review.” The authors find that of the 289 articles published in the 1980s, 57.8% were social scientific, 25.9% were qualitative, 2.1% were critical, 14.2% were categorized as other.

1993  Dennis Mumby puts for a research agenda for critical organizational communication research in an article titled “Critical Organizational Communication Studies: The Next 10 Years” in *Communication Monographs*.


2004  Elizabeth Jones, Bernadette Watson, John Gardner, and Cindy Gallois publish an article titled “Organizational Communication: Challenges for the New Century” in the *Journal of Communication*. In the article they identify six challenges organizational communication scholars face in the 21st Century: (1) innovate in theory and methodology, (2) acknowledge the role of ethics, (3) move from the microlevel to macrolevel issues, (4) examine new organizational structures, (5) understand the communication of organizational change, and (6) examine diversity and intergroup communication.

Key Takeaways

- Stanley Deetz articulated three different ways the term “organizational communication” can be understood: the discipline, ways to describe/explain organizations, and a phenomenon within organizations. His first perspective describes organizational communication as an academic discipline that consists of an intellectual history, textbooks, courses, degrees, etc… The second way to describe organizational communication as a way of describing organizations. Under this perspective, organizational communication is used to describe and/or explain how organizations functions. Lastly, organizational communication is a specific set of behaviors that is exhibited within an organization itself. People talk and interact with one another, which is a form of organizational communication, and through these interactions we actually create the phenomenon that is an organization.

- In this book, the authors define “organizational communication” as the process whereby an organizational stakeholder (or group of stakeholders) attempts to stimulate meaning in the mind of another an organizational...
stakeholder (or group of stakeholders) through intentional use of verbal, nonverbal, and/or mediated messages.

- The history of organizational communication is a complicated one. Starting with the industrial revolution and the evolution of the modern corporation, the idea of organizational communication was ultimately crystallized in the 1950s and 1960s. During the early years, most of the research conducted examining communication within an organization was conducted from a social scientific perspective, but starting in the 1980s with the work of Linda Putman, organizational communication research has become more diversified to include both interpretive and critical perspectives.

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**Exercises**

1. Find two examples of how you could use the term “organizational communication” for each Stanley Deetz’s three conceptualizations of the term. Did you find this process easy or difficult? Why?

2. Look at the definition of organizational communication provided in this book. Do you think this definition accurately reflects the nature of organizational communication? Why or why not?

3. Since the 1960s, which decade do you think has been the most important in the transformation of the field of organizational communication? Why?