

Does communication studies have an identity? Setting the bases for contemporary research

Leonarda García Jiménez *University of Colorado at Boulder*

Susana Martínez Guillem *University of Colorado at Boulder*

Abstract

This article is a reflection on the identity of communication research, motivated by what we perceive as an important need for consolidating our field of study. It therefore takes the form of a self-inquiry into the nature of communication research. Whereas the field of communication has expanded and consolidated, its identity continues to be problematic. At this moment, communication studies is defined as a field rather than as a science; we would argue, however, that we have enough features to be something more than a field. This is the central argument of this article: communication research is more than a field but less than a science. Why are we more than a field? Why aren't we a real science? What exactly are the meanings of science and field? We will first consider the importance of the identity issue; second, we will list the main features of communication research in order to justify our identity as something other than a field. Finally, we will propose a multidisciplinary theoretical base for performing communication research in our contemporary period.

Keywords

epistemology
ontology
communication
studies
paradigm
cognition
culture

Introduction: relevant questions on disciplines, identity and communication studies

In a recent reflection on the state-of-the-art in communication, Donsbach (2006: 437) stated that 'communication research has experienced the greatest growth of probably all academic fields over the last 30 years'. The increasing importance of the mass media and of communicative phenomena in general has made this one of the most important fields in the social sciences. This is certainly not surprising, since we live in information societies and, for this reason, it has become imperative to understand the world and human beings in a communicative way. In this sense, an important practical function is served by communication studies: communication is everywhere and we need to be there to study it. This issue is summarized by Dewey (quoted in Carey 2007: 42) as described below.

Communication is wonderful because it is the basis of human fellowship; it produces social bonds, bogus or not, that tie humans together and make coexistence possible. Society is possible because of the binding forces of shared information circulating in an organic system.

Communication studies, therefore, can be the key for analyzing our contemporary world; however, 'the nature of the discipline often remains unclear, while its identity is typically determined by administrative convenience' (Nordenstreng 2007: 211). In this article, we will attempt to contribute to the definition of our field's identity. Our first argument is that communication is more than a field. In order to justify this claim, we will list the main features of communication research. We will secondly propose a multidisciplinary theoretical base for doing communication research in our contemporary period that accounts for both the consistency needed to define ourselves and the diversity that characterizes and gives strength to our studies.

But what exactly is the difference between field and discipline? When Nordenstreng (2007) asks whether communication is a discipline or field, what does he mean exactly? A field is just a meeting point for different theories and traditions defining and studying communication (Craig 1999). But being a discipline implies something more. Disciplines are different points of view about the world and human beings; a discipline is not only a meeting point, it is a perspective on life.

Disciplines are defined not by cores of knowledge (epistemologies) but by views of being (ontologies). Disciplinary status for a field rests on the ontological status of that field's idea – disciplines represent various foundational ideas [...] Doctrines provide disciples with foundations for beliefs and action, but those foundations are views of being more than cores of knowledge.

(Shepherd 1993: 83)

This approach to the concept of discipline can help us address Nordenstreng's foundational question: discipline or field? As Shepherd (1993: 84) argues, 'academic disciplines, in this view, are distinguished not by the parcels of existence that they study, but by the views of existence they afford'. For this reason, one of the first steps in the construction of a discipline is the existence of the field (epistemology). When there is an object of study, there may be several disciplines that are interested in this object; a field is a meeting point for researching a concrete aspect about the world or human beings. In fact, during the first decades of the history of our field, communication was studied from different points of view, but there was no intention to create unified knowledge; each social science studied mass communication as a means for solving specific problems (the process of communication was divided according to Laswell's well-known formula: who (says) what (to) whom (in) what channel (with) what effect) or for criticizing the culture industry (Saperas 1998: 96). But what constitutes a discipline is not only an object of study, or even the capacity of the theories within it to generate knowledge. What gives both the object of study and theories their disciplinary character is a particular ontology, that is, a common point of view for analyzing the world. In general, objects of study are shared, because different disciplines look at objects of study from different perspectives.

Fields and disciplines shape science, which is not just made up of empirical knowledge in a positivist way. 'Science is a representation of the world, not the only one, in that the logic coherence is the most important feature, logic coherence that aspires to a complete coherence' (Omnes 2000: 274).

This coherence is constantly questioning itself in regard to revealing incoherence and suffers important transformations in scientific revolutions (Omnes 2000: 280–281). Thus, scientific knowledge has its origin in the ordinary knowledge that is transcended by science. For all of these reasons, scientific knowledge is integrated by natural and social sciences, but by humanities as well. Furthermore, science is ultimately, but not merely, constructed by intellectual communities made up of individuals in permanent interaction – the importance, hence, of agreements, of dialogue, of interchange in our area. An idealistic view of science usually overlooks the fact that human beings are the very people that make science possible (Rodrigo and Garcia, unpublished).

We see communication research as more than a field and as a young discipline, integrated by several levels of analysis – interpersonal, group, organizational, mediatic and cultural (Garcia 2007) – which can be studied from several traditions – rhetorical, semiotic, cybernetic, phenomenological, sociocultural, sociopsychological and critical (Craig 1999)–. The ontological data is communication, and that is why communication is not only an object of study but also a point of view. ‘Communication is a discipline to the extent that it presents a relatively organized way of attending to the world that explains how things come to be the way that they are’ (Deetz 1994: 567). This perspective is not new but, as Deetz (1994: 568) has noted, ‘disciplines arise when existing modes of explanation fail to provide compelling guidance for responses to a central set of new social issues’.

Our goal in this article is to address these questions. For this reason, we make two fundamental contributions to the general context of the field. On the one hand, we propose a reflection on our identity following Nordenstreng (in press), who makes a ‘strong claim for the philosophy of science in order to deal with the concept of communication and its relation to the system of sciences’. On the other hand, we develop some notes about the theoretical basis on which to analyze the world from communicology while emphasizing a cultural and cognitive point of view. We have organized our argument in the following way: firstly, we justify why it is necessary to define the identity of the field; secondly, we define this identity, arguing that communication studies, more than a field, is a young discipline because it offers a communicational perspective. Finally, we propose a multidisciplinary basis for analyzing the world and human beings, centered around social cognition, discourse and culture.

Defining our own identity

The goal of our philosophical reflection is to contribute to the consolidation of an identity for communication research, because even nowadays this is not clear in the general context of our field of study. As we have pointed out in the introduction, because of this situation, several researchers (Nordenstreng 2007; Donsbach 2006) have claimed the need to define our identity. This is the first contribution of this article: an approach to our own identity. We believe that this is a necessary first step in the legitimization of the studies in our universities and, consequently, in the increase of our contributions to scholarly inquiry.

Nordenstreng (2007) shows similar preoccupations when he indicates that it is necessary to do soul searching in communication research, inviting us to do reflexive research:

The nature of the discipline often remains unclear, while its identity is typically determined by administrative convenience and market demand rather than analysis of its historical development and scholarly position within the system of arts and sciences.

(Nordenstreng 2007: 211)

He calls for serious soul-searching and critical examination of the identity of the field: 'It's high time to return to the crossroads question discussed by Bernard Berelson, Wilbur Schramm and others in the late 1950s: Is mass communication research really a discipline or just a field?' (Nordenstreng 2007: 212)

Maybe the question is: why do we have to define our own identity? For Donsbach (2006: 442) the answer to this question is very clear. According to him, the identity or coherence of the field is important for extrinsic and intrinsic reasons:

Extrinsically, it is important to justify the existence and growth of our field to deans and provosts when we negotiate resources. Communication constantly struggles within universities everywhere to claim an independent administrative status. Our departments often compete with sociology, political science, or linguistics departments to maintain a distinct identity and to sustain a unit that provides a disciplinary home for scholars trained in communication. Intrinsically, coherence and identity is important for the function of science, which is the accumulation of accepted knowledge. This accumulation can only be achieved through communication within any given discipline: communication about the results and negotiation (and finally decision) about the acceptance of hypotheses and theories. This needs one platform, commonly accepted and read journals, associations and conferences.

(Donsbach 2006: 442–443)

Kuhn already addressed these questions when he claimed that scientific knowledge is cumulative during the periods of normal science, when new generalizations and new theories are added to consolidated scientific knowledge (Kuhn 1989: 86). For this reason we need common platforms on which to place our contributions during periods of normal science. However, whereas Donsbach points out the need for defining identity, he fails to do so himself. Therefore, although we still need to define and consolidate our identity, the question remains: who are we? And what is communication research? We would argue that at this moment we are more than a field, but less than a science. In the next section we will argue why we think this is so.

Communication research: more than a field

Here we will indicate the features of science in order to show how they are present in our field. Our main argument is that, although some of our

characteristics allow us to be more than a field, we still are less than a science, since we lack another set of features that are necessary to be considered as a consolidated discipline.

Our hypothesis, therefore, is that communication research is more than a field because of the following three characteristics: object of study; communicational perspective and critical mass.

Object of study

This is probably the first step in terms of being able to talk about a science. We need to have something to research, and we know that our object is communication. And not only mass communication – even though it is one of the most important objects – but also interpersonal, group, organizational and cultural communication, the most generic level of study (communication and society, communication and culture) (Garcia 2007: 44). In this sense, the classical levels of analysis are a very useful way for defining our object of study. However, the definition of communication sometimes differs depending on the perspective. Thus, the sociopsychological tradition focuses on the social influence aspect (Craig and Muller 2007: 313), whereas the cybernetic tradition conceives communication as a control process (Aguirre 2008: 481). On the other hand, the critical approach exposes ‘hidden social mechanisms that distort communication and supports political efforts to resist the power of those mechanisms’ (Craig and Muller 2007: 425), and the sociocultural approach points out that social life is a symbolic construction built through communication. Be that as it may, an important and common link is that communication is an interactive process that has several levels (from interpersonal to cultural), which can be analyzed from several points of view – rhetorical, semiotic, cybernetic, phenomenological, sociocultural, sociopsychological or critical (Craig 1999) –.

Communicational perspective

According to Shepherd (1993: 83) ‘disciplines are defined not by cores of knowledge (i.e., epistemologies) but by views of Being (i.e., ontologies)’.

The object of study, therefore, is an important step for building a discipline; however, the difference between disciplines is not in the object but in the point of view, in the perspective, in the ontology. This is the science of the most abstract predicates; it is the most general way for understanding the world (Ferrater 1994: 2622–2624).

Academic disciplines, in this view, are distinguished not by the parcels of existence that they study, but by the views of existence they afford. Anthropology, art, biology, chemistry, economics, history, philosophy [...] each offers a particular view of being.

(Shepherd 1993: 84)

In the introduction to his best-known book, *Being and Time*, Heidegger pointed out that ontology – the view of being – is the pre-scientific subdivision of knowledge. He attempted to explain the essence of being, with ontology as preliminary understanding and a priori substantiation

(Heidegger 2003: 32). That is the ontological question: what is the essence of being? For the communication field it is communication:

Communication, from a communicational perspective, is not a secondary phenomenon that can be explained by antecedent psychological, sociological, cultural or economic factors; rather, communication itself is the primary, constitutive social process that explains all these other factors.

(Craig 1999: 126)

Thus, communication science may exist because the communicational perspective exists, and this is, therefore, another point of view for analyzing human beings and society. The ontology of communicology – that is, communication as ontological information – means that the world and human beings, in their essence, are communication: the world does not exist until it is communicated. The human being is, in essence, communication. Even the essence of the world is, for us, communication. In order to address Heidegger's question, we believe that it is necessary to discuss a specific philosophical area: the philosophy of dialogue. There is a big theoretical distance between, on the one hand, Heidegger, and on the other, Buber, Levinas or Mounier. Heidegger's thinking has a complex philosophical foundation, whereas Buber, Levinas and Mounier are very basic and straightforward authors. Nonetheless, we believe that communicology thinking can answer Heidegger's question through the philosophy of dialogue. This point of view and this communicational perspective, therefore, can be checked with the philosophy of dialogue (García 2008).

We propose dialogue philosophies as the ontological base of communication science, because the definitional feature of the human being is communication. In order to assess the ontological keys of Buber, Mounier and Levinas' thinking, let us examine these authors one by one.

Buber (1998: 11) points out that we have two possible relationships with the world: the relationship 'I-Thou' and the relationship 'I-It'. But the real relationship, the relationship I-Thou, is the one we find in communication. Buber notes that 'I do not exist without You', so, the real relationship between I and You is a dialogical relationship (Buber 1998: 15). The other relationship, I-It, is a materialist and superficial relationship, so for this reason, the original word is I-Thou and the original word is the dialogical relationship, that is, the real encounter with the other. I-Thou, the first relationship, is founded in communication, whereas the second relationship, I-It, is founded in appearance and in objectification (Buber 1998: 26). Buber indicates that the essence of the human being is the encounter with the other. For him the individual human being has not got essence; the individual human being, without the other, is very near to objectification and to dehumanization. The real I does not exist without You, and that relationship between I and You is a communicative relationship – a dialogical relationship. I do not exist without You and, for this I-Thou to be possible, we need communication. Only with communication, with the encounter with the other and with the dialogical relationship, can I and You exist (Buber 1998: 15). The real person, the real I, appears with communication. Buber says that the first basic word, the origin, is the word I-Thou. In this way, the origin is communication, the

relationship. Objectification is the next step, but the first step is communication, in such a way that the human being is dialogical, is communication (Buber 1998: 23). And the real world is I-Thou; the world exists because of the dialogical relationship, because of communication.

Mounier (1968: 19) argues that the fundamental experience of the human being is communication, which is the primitive fact, the primitive event. The human being is founded in several original acts that can be resumed in only one: the communicative action (Mounier 1968: 21). In general, Mounier and Buber both argue for the communicative origin of the human being; they declare that communication is the realization of human being and that communicative interaction is the source of real life.

Levinas (2001: 250), in turn, discusses responsibility towards the other, towards otherness. That point of view is the core of the ethics of communication.

To sum up, with the philosophies of the dialogue, human beings are defined in terms of their ability to communicate in a dialogical relationship and in the encounter with the other. For this reason, we say that communication is ontological data. Thus, communication is an object of study but a point of view as well. Our field studies communication in a communicational way, and therefore it organizes thinking, society and human beings according to communication. Communication is not something extrinsic to the human being, nor the result of a specific action, but is something intrinsic – it is the essence of the human being.

Buber, Levinas and Mounier's philosophies are appropriate ways for defining our ontology – the communicational perspective. The communicological ontology exists and can be stated very simply: communication is the most important thing in the world, and it is the origin of the world.

Critical mass

A critical mass is integrated by researchers who analyze the world and human beings with a communicational perspective – researchers who develop most of their contributions inside the academic world of communication (faculties, research groups, associations, journals, etc.). Within our field, there exists a very important critical mass with a communicational perspective. This is not anecdotal, moreover, because science exists for the critical mass. Sometimes a brilliant mind appears, but usually or most of the time science advances with normal people and with a critical mass. Thus, the third characteristic of communication research is the faith of the disciples: the people who are educated in the communication field.

What are we lacking?

For all of the above arguments, communication is more than a field, more than a meeting point and a focal point, because it constitutes another point of view and it possesses an important critical mass. But is it a science – interdisciplinary, but nevertheless a science?

We must acknowledge that we do not think communication is a science: we need more faith in our field, a better understanding of our perspective, more methodological training, more theories, more reflections about the definition of our identity and more results for making a better

world. In this sense, the discipline must respond to new social, economic and psychological changes.

Moreover, a radical change in mindset is required, at least in Europe in terms of placing research as the first function of university faculties, overcoming orientation as a 'professional school' and developing and configuring the academic field of research. Other needs are the design of scientific policies and greater integration of the field. In short, it is necessary to improve demand and require public authorities to provide sustainable scientific policies in order to project the contribution of communication sciences to the knowledge society. For communication studies to be a real science, it would also be necessary to promote research programmes (in the sense described by Lakatos) on relevant topics, so as to prevent researchers from going from one theme to another without real criteria (something that does not happen in other scientific disciplines); this would avoid what Nordenstreng has called the 'surfing syndrome' (Rodrigo and Garcia, unpublished).

Finally, it is necessary to clarify a paradigm for our studies. What could be a possible paradigm for communication research? We will develop some notes to clarify the bases for contemporary research in the next section.

A proposal for a working paradigm

As we have seen, research within the discipline of communication studies has a distinctive and common object of study. But how do we explore this? What makes a communicative perspective? This is the second contribution of this article: for us, the answer to this question lies in the integration of cognitive, discursive and social aspects of the different phenomena that we study. Research in our field has developed from viewing communication as transmission to viewing it as social and symbolic construction: in other words, switching from the transmission view to the ritual view (Carey 2007). This development implies approaching phenomenon with a cultural and cognitive dimension: going back and forth between cognition to society through communication. We would argue that the whole field of communication studies could benefit from a multidisciplinary framework emphasizing the interplay between cognition, discourse and society if our goal is to ask fundamental questions and provide the thorough answers that our contemporary societies need. Although it is difficult and, in our opinion, unproductive to establish fixed boundaries to each approach, we will still be making these distinctions, which should be interpreted as an imperfect way of facilitating understanding and discussion of the different perspectives. For this reason, we propose two intersecting pillars as the bases of communication research: firstly, constructivism (cognition), and secondly, ethnography (culture).

Firstly, we would argue that an understanding of our cognitive mechanisms is the first necessary step towards a comprehensive approach to discourse production and comprehension, which, in our opinion, should be at the core of any communicative analysis. Only by first paying attention to the cognitive structures that allow us to interpret and produce meanings will we be able to fully understand and embrace the complexities of communicative practices, leaving us then in a position to dream of acceptance and exploration of difference as an unquestionable part of our

research (Deetz, in press). However, instead of focusing on outdated concepts of traditional psychology, we believe that more recent interdisciplinary proposals, such as cognitive linguistic approaches, can constitute a valuable starting point for our scholars to step out of a prejudiced understanding of cognition as separate from a discursive and cultural approach to communication. As Lakoff (quoted in Dascal 1985: 89) points out, 'communication matters most when [...] we do not share the same cultural assumptions, relevant knowledge, and relevant experience, and especially where our conceptual metaphors and folk theories differ'. A cognitive starting point in our analyses, therefore, is needed for the problematization of all kinds of communicative practices in which the diverse nature of the participants' cognitive models may lead to different types of challenges. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 231) put it, 'when people who are talking don't share the same culture, knowledge, values and assumptions, mutual understanding can be especially difficult'.

The potentialities of a cognitive-linguistic understanding of communication included in our analyses, however, are enormous and are only presently beginning to be explored. The concept of metaphor, for example, has been successfully applied to discourses about biotechnology (Holmgreen 2008), to marginalized communities (Adelman and Frey 1997) and to persuasion (Sopory 2006), although there are many other prospective applications. Apart from these rare discussions of metaphors, relevant cognitive phenomena developed at length within cognitive linguistics remain unknown or unexplored by communication scholars. In a similar line of argument, Van Gorp (2007) has recently proposed the need for integrating constructivism and functionalism; his article entitled 'The constructionist approach to framing: bringing culture back in', is a clear example of multi-paradigm. Here the author theorizes about the specific theory of framing (in the sense of shaping) and points out the following:

Framing as a bridging concept between cognition and culture [...]. The effort is to argue how frames, as part of culture, get embedded in media content, how they work, and how they interact with the mental schemata of both the journalist and the audience member.

(Van Gorp 2007: 61)

Mental spaces, metonymy, conceptual blending or figure/ground effects could be useful concepts in a comprehensive approach to communication that highlights the interdependency of cognition, discourse and society without over-emphasizing any one of these elements in isolation. Communication scholars, we would argue, are in a privileged position to broaden the focus on linguistic structure and incorporate other types of discourse, and then to explore this interdependency by systematically incorporating the social dimensions of cognition into our theoretical and practical framework. This is a necessary move for communication scholars in their efforts to take seriously the linguistic turn (Deetz, in press) without overlooking the cognitive aspects of discourse.

The cognitive approach can be at the core of the symbolic construction of social life; thus, in order to understand how the meanings inside society are built through communicative interactions, it is very useful to

explore the cognitive dimension that we are summarizing here. In this sense, it is possible that constructivism and the sociocultural tradition in a general sense are at the basis of communication studies. Because communication is understanding (Martin Algarra 2003), a sociocultural perspective is an interesting way to explore it, as, in this tradition: 'Communication is a process essentially involved with concepts such as social structures, identities, norms, rituals, and collective belief systems' (Craig and Muller 2007: 365). With this point of view in mind, we can explore our object of study from micropsychological theories (cognitive) to macrosocial ones (constructivism), bearing in mind the natural symbolic dimension of human life.

As we have just pointed out, the social dimensions of communication cannot be excluded from a communicative perspective. We believe that linguistic and cognitive approaches within the anthropological tradition constitute possible resources in the development of comprehensive analyses of communicative practices. In fact, it is in linguistic and cognitive anthropology where authors have most insistently emphasized the need to take into account the social dimension of mental structures.

Holland and Quinn (1987) point out that our knowledge does not come from firsthand, personal experiences alone, but is mostly communicated to us by the people we know. It would be useful, therefore, to explain how specific sets of goals or expectations come to being, rather than take for granted that these exist. Problematizing how different themes are (re) created and transmitted to organize our goals could be the task of communication scholars when explaining, for example, why a particular text or situation is perceived as funny, appropriate or expected in one context or culture but as offensive, inappropriate or unexpected in another. Different groups of people will have different expectations and goals associated with the same concept, and this should be taken into account in communicative analyses across different areas. A communicative analysis that wants to emphasize the importance of shared meanings, whether of political discourse, close relationships, television shows or organizational meetings, needs to consider how different expectations influence specific communication practices.

Researchers in the ethnography of communication and interactional sociolinguistics have also tried to link language and culture by emphasizing the social character of knowledge (Gumperz 1971; 1982; Gumperz and Hymes 1986). These authors recover the understanding of language as 'doing', thus emphasizing the connection between language and context already established by Malinowski (1944). Both linguistic and cognitive anthropology can help us to take into account the existence of cultural background knowledge as a result of socialization. According to Gumperz (1982: 207), 'knowledge of the world and socio-cultural presuppositions must not be regarded as merely adding additional subtleties to or clarifying what we learn from the propositional content of utterances'. However, this approach to language is a purely interactional one that 'focuses on the exchange between speakers, i.e., how a speaker by his choice of topic and his choice of linguistic variables adapts to other participants or to his environment and how others in turn react to him' (Gumperz and Hymes 1986: 17). In contrast, for cognitive anthropologists

the emphasis is on how our cultural background knowledge manifests itself in mental conceptual maps. Gumperz (1982: 156) also offers a useful distinction between two different (although not incompatible) traditions in what he sees as the study of 'the relationship of extralinguistic, sociocultural knowledge to grammar'. On the one hand, there is 'the anthropological tradition of the ethnography of communication, which can help us analyse "natural" conversation'. On the other hand, the same author argues that 'there is discourse analysis, derived from speech act theory, linguistic pragmatics, frame semantics [...] and artificial intelligence' (Gumperz 1982: 154).

According to Gumperz (1982: 156), the first tradition 'aims to show how social norms affect the use and distribution of communicative resources, whereas the second one focuses on interpretation and the cognitive functioning of contextual and other knowledges'. We see these two traditions as crucial to the building of a multidisciplinary basis for communication theory and practice.

To sum up, we would like to point out that the development of a coherent socio-cognitive approach to discourse production and understanding, together with the consolidation of communication studies as a discipline, is the main challenge facing us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. What we are seeing nowadays is the beginning of a productive integration of several perspectives (Koller 2005; Zinken 2003) that should be fostered in order to explore, on the one hand, communicative practices in the situations in which they occur and, on the other hand, the underlying cognitive structures which shape our interactions, our behaviours and, ultimately, our understanding of the world.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article has been twofold. First, we have argued for the need for communication studies to consolidate its status as a well-established discipline, for purely administrative as well as more fundamental reasons. We have shown how we can begin to argue that we are more than a field by emphasizing our unique communicational perspective in our object of study, and in the existence of a critical mass that reproduces and expands this perspective. We have argued that these elements are the necessary components of any science and, in the case of communication studies, they are already in place. However, they need to be further developed and strengthened in order for communication to be regarded as a science. We think that the interdisciplinary identity of communication studies has both a social scientific and humanistic base. In this sense, we need higher epistemological and ontological education in order to consolidate this identity. Second, we have advanced a multidisciplinary basis for research that can capture the complexity of our object of study by integrating cognition, communication and culture as essential and interrelated elements of communicative phenomena. Now it is the turn for communication scholars to embrace these in comprehensive theories and analyses. This interdisciplinary framework can open up new and exciting possibilities for the conceptualization of discourse, culture and cognition and, ultimately, for the understanding of human experiences in a communicational way.

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Contributor details

Leonarda García Jiménez is a visiting scholar at the University of Colorado at Boulder (USA) with a post-doctoral scholarship from Seneca Foundation (Regional Agency of Science and Technology, Murcia, Spain). She has produced more than forty works (articles, books, book chapters and conference papers), and has taught courses and seminars on communication theory in Spain and Mexico.

Contact: C. Villa leal, n 3, 5 dcha. Cp. 30001. Murcia. Spain.
E-mail: leonardagj@hotmail.com

Susana Martínez Guillem holds an MA in communication from the University of Iowa, USA (2003) and is currently working on her Ph.D. at the University of Colorado at Boulder (USA). Her main research interests explore the intersections between discourse studies and rhetorical criticism, with an emphasis on critical approaches within these traditions. Her latest research dealing with these matters is scheduled for publication in *Discourse & Society* in autumn 2009.

Contact: University of Colorado at Boulder, Department of Communication, 270 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309, USA.
E-mail: susana.martinez-guillem@colorado.edu



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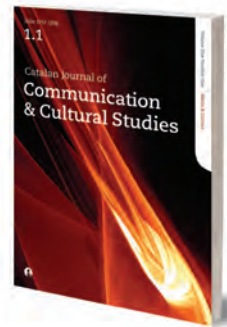
Volume 2, Special Issue Call for Papers

The Communicative Turn in Risk Communication Theory and Practice

Guest editors

Tom Horlick-Jones (Cardiff University)

Jordi Farré (Rovira i Virgili University, Tarragona)



In recent years a technical discourse of risk has assumed the status of a universal basis for governance and administrative practice in both private and public sector organisations within Europe, the United States and elsewhere. This re-framing of pre-existing organisational concerns in terms of risk categories reflects an underlying bureaucratic concern with the accountable, controllable and cost-effective management of contingency (Horlick-Jones, Power, Renn etc.). During this period, the use of risk communication as a regulatory and policy tool has become increasingly important as a part of institutional attempts to inform and influence the behaviour of target audiences. Research into formal risk communication has now developed from a concern with the top-down provision of factual materials to a focus on a range of more diverse activities, with a trend toward various sorts of stakeholder engagement (e.g. Fischhoff).

Proceeding by analogy with the celebrated linguistic (or hermeneutic) 'turn' in the social sciences (e.g. Barthes, Rorty etc.), in which language use came to be seen as at least in part constitutive of the objects of their concern, this collection of papers will address the communicative turn by which risk objects, categories and practices have come to be shaped by the theory and discourse that informs risk communication.

Catalonia, as a European industrial region with petrochemical and nuclear complexes, has a strategic interest in promoting research into risk communication processes. The Catalan Journal of Communication and Cultural Studies welcomes proposals for contributions to this special issue that address this central theme. Papers might be grounded in empirical studies of specific risk communication processes; make linkages between communication theory and risk theory; or perhaps offer some combination of all of these. Other possible perspectives might include the relationship between risk communication and risk management practices; the double hermeneutic (Giddens) linking formal risk communication and the everyday mundane risk practices of organisational or lay actors; and the notion of engagement as a process of 'co-generative theorising' (Deetz).

The journal plans to include papers of around 6–7,000 words, and short research notes and reports of around 2–3,000 words. Abstracts (of no more than 500 words) for proposed contributions should be sent to catalan.journal@urv.cat by 20 December 2009. Acceptance of abstracts will be confirmed by 20 January 2010. Full manuscripts should be submitted before 31 March 2010. All contributions will be subject to anonymous peer-review.