

Philosophies and Philosophic Issues in Communication, 1995–2004

By James A. Anderson and Geoffrey Baym

The term *philosophy of communication* is a doubly articulated concept that refers both to the undergirding tenets and system of beliefs that justify a set of professional and pragmatic practices and to the study of those tenets and beliefs. Given the over 100 divisions and interest groups of our four major associations (ICA, NCA, AEJMC, BEA¹), one can say without irony that communication is philosophically rich. One could also say that, like the storied Platte River, we are a mile wide and an inch deep with no center channel.

As a field of study, philosophy of communication asks the questions that are prior to and foundational for any topical or disciplinary issue. As the parent organization of this journal puts it: “Philosophy of Communication is broadly concerned with theoretical, analytical, and political issues that cut across the various boundaries that are often taken for granted within the study of communication.”² Definitions of this sort create fields of endeavor without visible boundaries and literature reviews that could include nearly everything. Clearly, no matter how much space is allocated, any effort to write “the state of philosophy of communication” is doomed to the banal “there’s a lot of it” or a careful examination of some small part of it. We’ve chosen the latter.

Philosophy of Communication Review: Part 1— Philosophies of the Discipline

To direct that examination we opted to use the traditional, encompassing set of four issues—existence, knowledge, knowledge practices, and value, or, more technically, ontology, epistemology, praxeology, and axiology—adopted by a number of communication theorists (see Anderson, 1996; Littlejohn, 2000; Miller, 2004). These issues raise questions that are formulated into something like this: What are

¹ The International Communication Association shows 18 divisions and interest groups but has recently tightened its requirements for propagating divisions. The National Communication Association at last count had 55 divisions and interest groups and was planning more.

² <http://www.icahdq.org/divisions/index.html#DIVISION9>, accessed February 9, 2004.

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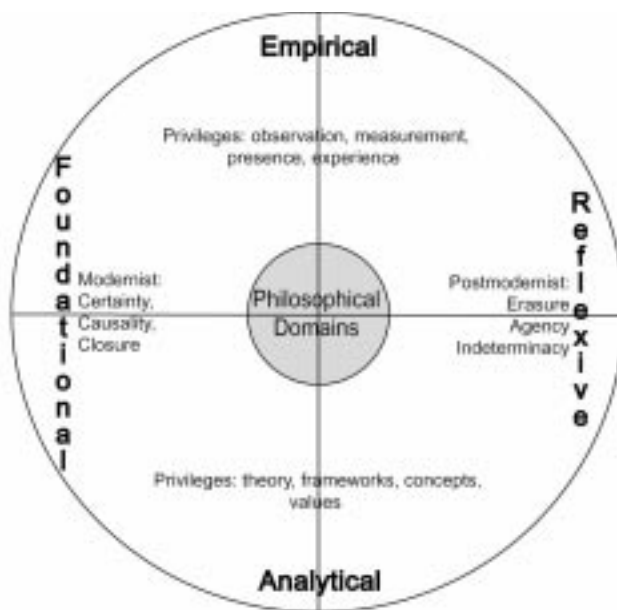


Figure 1. Philosophical domains of communication scholarship.

the objects of our analysis, what is the character of our knowledge about them, how do we obtain that knowledge, and what is the value of obtaining it? The possible answers to these questions keep a very animated conversation going because philosophies to be worthy of the name have to hold to some position on them and, of course, they divide across them (e.g., Burgoon, 1989; Caplan, 2001; Craig, 1999; Hearn, 1999; Kalbfleisch, 2002; Pavitt, 1999). The difference between a critical rhetorician and a communication cognivist, for example, spans all four issue domains and is great enough that they occupy the same disciplinary space only by administrative convenience (see Lannamann, 1991; Mifsud, 2000).

The members of the communication community take a number of positions within each of the four issues, but for the purposes of this review each can be conveniently divided into two major positions. In ontology we divide over whether the objects of our analysis have an independent or socially determined existence. On one side, which we call the foundational, the real is assumed to be constituted by material objects that display discernible boundaries and exist within relatively stable and observable patterns of relationships. On the other side—the reflexive—the objects of inquiry make their appearance within localized patterns of human practice, language, and discourse.

In epistemology, the division tracks along a similar divide between a foundationalism that holds knowledge as the correspondence between mental impression and the true shape of the independently existent actual, and a social constructionism that holds knowledge as simultaneously enabled and constrained within social achievement.

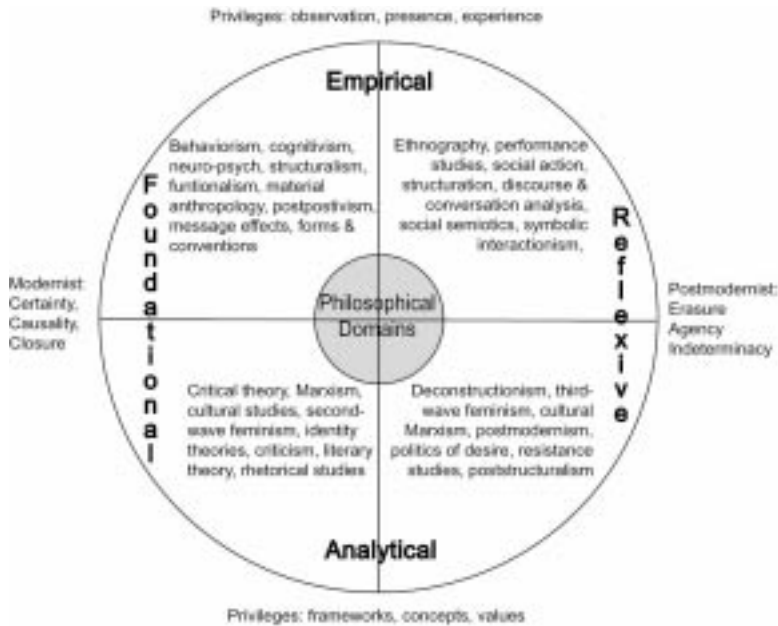


Figure 2. Scholarship communities.

In praxeology, most are familiar with the quantoid/qualoid disputes, but that appears to be an intrafamilia argument and the real break may be over an ancient empirical (of both Q-types)/conceptual split as to whether claims need to be fixed in observations or ideas.

Finally, in axiology, the split is across the value free (objectivism) and the value-intended (subjectivism). The former presents knowledge as neutral statements describing what is, whereas the later speaks of knowledge as not only statements of what is but also of what ought to be.

Philosophic Domains

It does not take a lot of work to see that the issue of ontology and epistemology depend on one another and so do the issues in praxeology and axiology. If one plots those convergences, one can end up with a map that looks something like Figure 1.

The first action of Figure 1 is the creation of four communities jointly described by their hemispheric locations. Hemispheres divide top to bottom over the empirical /analytical (realist/idealist) duality with the northern half privileging observation, measurement, presence, and experience and the southern privileging theory (as in cultural theory), frameworks, concepts, and values. They divide east to west over the foundational/reflexive (materialist/constructionist) duality that ever more so embodies the modernist/postmodernist differences across certainty, causality, and closure on the modernist side and erasure (constructed, instrumental certainty), agency, and indeterminacy on the pomo side. The result is a set of four

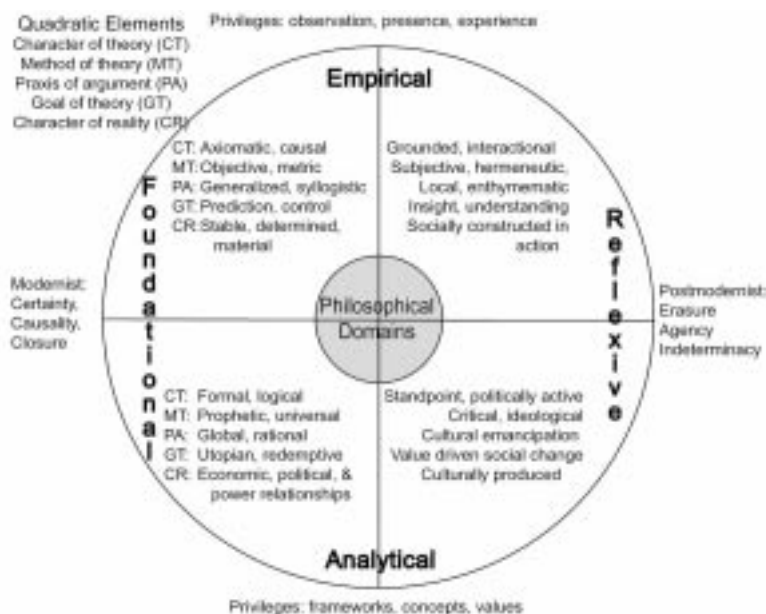


Figure 3. Archetypal terms of each philosophical domain.

domains each describe by location: foundationalist/empirical, foundationalist/analytical, reflexive/empirical, and reflexive analytical.

Philosophic Memberships

The test of any such heuristic map is whether it populates well. Figure 2 presents the distribution of communities of scholarship across the quadrants. The evidence of Figure 2 is that communities that would find affinities for one another are grouped together and that those that would separate find themselves in different quarter circles or quadrants.

Philosophic Terms and Domain Analysis

The final step in this analysis is to consider the archetypal terms of each quadrant philosophy. There are any number of sorting screens that can reveal those terms. We have chosen five: the character of theory that arises in the philosophic domain, the typical method associated with that theory type, the form of the argument that is used to advance claim, the goal or objective of the theory and the underlying assumptions about the reality the theory engages. Figure 3 shows the values that appear in each quadrant.

In order to test the empirical resonance of the domains, we searched *Communication Abstracts* using the term "communication theory." We selected 94 entries whose substantive discussion involved the five elements we used as sorting screens.

Nine articles were subsequently removed, primarily because they were comparisons that did not clearly reveal their own position (e.g., Caplan, 2001; Pavitt, 1999; Roloff & Anastasiou, 2001; or Waldeck, Kearney, & Plax, 2001). The remaining 85 were coded into one of the four quadrants (virtually all nonproblematically, as one might expect, given the terms of the original search). We make no foundationalist/empiricist claims about this data set, though we do believe it resonates well with the quadrant activity of the discipline. The next four sections, then, present each of the four quadrants, the particular values that our screens assume for that quadrant, and an overview analysis of entries coded in that quadrant.

Foundational/empirical. This quadrant is the home of scholarship that aspires to the mantle of “science.” It reflects the values common to the material sciences. The archetypal character of theory in this quadrant is axiomatic and causal; its method, objective and metric; its arguments, generalized and syllogistic deductions that make claims about prediction and control of a stable, determined, and material reality.

Thirty-three entries under the search term “communication theory” met the criteria of this quadrant. Seventeen were drawn from the interpersonal topic area, 14 from mediated communication, and 2 from organizational communication, both of which were cognitivist. Table 1 provides the bibliographic entries.

Foundational/analytical. If its overhead neighbor is the home of scientific authority, this quadrant is the home of philosophic authority. Its theory is formal, which is to say propositional, maintained in logical coherence aiming at prophetic veridicality about the universals of human life. Its arguments are global and highly rational intending utopian, redemptive solutions (“Workers arise!”). It functions in the reality of hierarchical economic, political, and power relationships. Twenty-four entries represented this philosophic quadrant. Eleven came out of the broadly defined cultural studies, 6 from rhetoric; 3 from feminism; 3 from communicative ethics; and 1 from media. Table 2 provides the bibliographic information.

Reflexive/empirical. Reflexivity is a recognition that our knowledge, especially of human things, is human knowledge. We create it, constitute its terms, and participate within it at every level. In its strong program, reflexivity represents a rejection of the unity of knowledge, acknowledging the failure of the social sciences to both coalesce and to achieve a dominant epistemological position.

Empirical theory from this position is a “bottom up” enterprise, with the theorist noting her or his propositional situatedness. The method is the researcher as instrument advancing claims from a cultural and sociological (not idiosyncratic) subjectivity. Those claims are local (though the locale may be large) and in narrative, enthymematic form and directed toward insight and understanding of action that socially constructs the reality in which we live.

Thirteen entries came out of this quadrant. Ten represented organizational studies and three came from interpersonal. Table 3 catalogues the citations.

Reflexive/analytical. Whereas its upstairs neighbor tends toward the reflective and contemplative insight, this quadrant is the home of the scholarship of action. Typical scholarship here has an avowed political agenda. It intends social change. Of course every quadrant is political, if in no more than the advancement of its

Table 1. Communication Theory Exemplars From the Foundational/Empirical Quadrant

Author	Date	Title	Publication
Acitelli, L. K.	2002	Relationship awareness: Crossing the bridge between cognition and communication	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 12, 92–112
Albada, K. F., Knapp, M. L., & Theune, K. E.	2002	Interaction appearance theory: Changing perceptions of physical attractiveness through social interaction	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 12, 8–40
Andersen, P. A., Guerrero, L. K., Buller, D. B., & Jorgensen, P. F.	1998	An empirical comparison of three theories of nonverbal immediacy exchange	<i>Human Communication Research</i> , 24, 501–535
Baldwin, M. W., & Keelan, J. P. R.	1999	Interpersonal expectations as a function of self-esteem and sex	<i>Jrnl of Social & Personal Relationships</i> , 16, 822–833
Ball-Rokeach, S. J.	1998	A theory of media power and a theory of media use: Different stories, questions, and ways of thinking.	<i>Mass Communication & Society</i> , 1/2, 5–40
Bandura, A.	2001	Social cognitive theory of mass communication	<i>Media Psychology</i> , 3, 265–299
Beaudoin, C. E., & Thorson, E.	2002	A marketplace theory of media use	<i>Mass Comm & Society</i> , 5, 241–262
Bergstrom, M. J., & Holmes, M. E.	2000	Lay theories of successful aging after the death of a spouse: A network text analysis	<i>Health Communication</i> , 12, 377–406
Bevan, J. L.	2003	Expectancy violation theory and sexual resistance in close, cross-sex relationships	<i>Comm Monographs</i> , 70, 68–82
Bradac, J. J.	2001	Theory comparison: Uncertainty reduction, problematic integration, uncertainty management, and other curious constructs	<i>Journal of Communication</i> , 51, 456–476
Canary, D. J., & Zelle, E. D.	2000	Current research programs on relational maintenance behaviors	<i>Comm Yearbook</i> , 23, 305–339
Cate, R. M., Levin, L. A., & Richmond, L. S.	2002	Premarital relationship stability: A review of recent research	<i>Jrnl of Social & Personal Relationships</i> , 19, 261–284
Christen, C. T., & Gunther, A. C.	2003	The influence of mass media and other culprits on the projection of personal opinion	<i>Comm Research</i> , 30, 414–431
Durham, M. G.	1998	On the relevance of standpoint epistemology to the practice of journalism: The case for “strong objectivity”	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 8, 117–140
Eastman, S. T.	1998	Programming theory under stress: The active industry and the active audience	<i>Comm Yearbook</i> , 21, 323–377
Hullett, C. R., & Boster, F. J.	2001	Matching messages to the values underlying value-expressive and social-adjustive attitudes: Reconciling an old theory with a contemporary measurement approach	<i>Communication Monographs</i> , 68, 133–153

Table 1, continued

Author	Date	Title	Publication
Ifert, D. E.	2000	Resistance to interpersonal requests: A summary and critique of recent research	<i>Comm Yearbook</i> , 23, 125-161
Kalbfleisch, P. J.	2002	Communication-based theory development: Building theories for communication research	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 12, 5-7
Knobloch, S., & Zillmann, D.	2002	Mood management via the digital jukebox	<i>Journal of Comm</i> 52, 351-366
Koerner, A. F., & Fitzpatrick, M. A.	2002	Toward a theory of family communication	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 12, 70-91
Kramer, M. W.	1999	Motivation to reduce uncertainty: A reconceptualization of uncertainty reduction theory	<i>Management Comm Quarterly</i> , 13, 305-316
Le, B., & Agnew, C. R.	2001	Need fulfillment and emotional experience in interdependent romantic relationships	<i>Journal of Social Personal Relationships</i> , 18, 423-440
Meyer, Janet R.	2000	Cognitive models of message production: Unanswered questions	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 10, 176-187
Ostini, J., & Fung, A. Y. H.	2002	Beyond the four theories of the press: A new model of national media systems	<i>Mass Comm & Society</i> , 5, 41-56
Planalp, S.	2003	The unacknowledged role of emotion in theories of close relationships: How do theories feel?	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 13, 78-99
Raney, A. A., & Bryant, J.	2002	Moral judgment and crime drama: An integrated theory of enjoyment	<i>Journal of Comm</i> , 52, 402-415
Ruggiero, T. E.	2000	Uses and gratifications theory in the 21st century	<i>Mass Comm & Society</i> , 3, 3-37
Singhal, A., & Rogers, E. M.	2002	A theoretical agenda for entertainment-education	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 12, 117-135.
Soukup, C.	2000	Building a theory of multimedia CMC: An analysis, critique, and integration of computer-mediated communication theory & research	<i>New Media & Society</i> , 2, 407-425
Timmerman, C. E.	2002	The moderating effect of mindlessness/mindfulness upon media richness and social influence explanations of organizational media use	<i>Communication Monographs</i> , 69, 111-131
VanderVoort, L.	2002	Functional and causal explanations in group communication research	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 12, 469-486
Zillmann, D.	1999	Exemplification theory: Judging the whole by some of its parts	<i>Media Psychology</i> , 1, 69-94
Zillmann, D.	2000	Mood management in the context of selective exposure theory	<i>Comm Yearbook</i> , 23, 103-123

Table 2. Communication Theory Exemplars From Foundational/Analytical Quadrant

Author	Date	Title	Publication
Ang, P. H., & Dalmia, S.	2000	Operational, not theoretical: A critique of the current paradigm in development communication	<i>Asian Jnl of Comm</i> , 10, 18–32
Asen, R.	2003	The multiple Mr. Dewey: Multiple publics and permeable borders in John Dewey's theory of the public sphere	<i>Argumentation & Advocacy</i> , 39, 174–188
Aucoin, J. L.	2001	Epistemic responsibility and narrative theory: The literary journalism of Ryszard Kapuscinski	<i>Journalism</i> , 2, 5–21
Benoit, W. L.	2000	Beyond genre theory: The genesis of rhetorical action	<i>Comm Monographs</i> , 67, 178–192
Berkenkotter, C.	2001	Genre systems at work: DSM-IV and rhetorical recontextualization in psychotherapy paperwork	<i>Written Comm</i> , 18, 326–349
Burkhalter, S., Gastil, J., & Kelshaw, T.	2002	A conceptual definition and theoretical model of public deliberation in small face-to-face groups	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 12, 398–422
Campbell, J. A.	1998	Rhetorical theory in the twenty-first century	<i>Southern Comm Jnl</i> , 63, 291–308
Condit, C. M., et al.	2002	Recipes or blueprints for our genes? How contexts selectively activate the multiple meanings of metaphors	<i>Quarterly Jnl of Speech</i> , 88, 303–325
Corner, J.	1997	Television in theory	<i>Media, Culture & Soc</i> , 19, 247–262
Fitzpatrick, T.	2002	Critical theory, information society and surveillance technologies	<i>Information Comm & Soc</i> , 5, 357–378
Fusfield, W.	1997	Communication without constellation? Habermas's argumentative turn in (and away from) critical theory	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 7, 301–320
Greene, R. W.	2003	John Dewey's eloquent citizen: Communication, judgment, and postmodern capitalism	<i>Argumentation & Advocacy</i> , 39, 189–200
Hegde, R. S.	1998	The view from elsewhere: Locating difference and the politics of representation from a transnational feminist perspective	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 8, 271–297
Hegde, R. S., & Shome, R.	2002	Postcolonial scholarship—productions and directions: An interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 12, 271–286

Table 2, continued

Author	Date	Title	Publication
Huspek, M.	1997	Toward normative theories of communication with reference to the Frankfurt School: An introduction	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 7, 265–276
Kitch, C.	1998	Changing theoretical perspectives on women's media images: The emergence of patterns in a new area of historical scholarship	<i>Journalism & Mass Comm Quarterly</i> , 74, 477–489
Krippendorff, K.	2002	Undoing power	<i>Critical Studies in Mass Comm</i> , 12, 101–132
Langsdorf, L.	2000	Refusing individuality: How human beings are made into subjects	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 7, 321–342
Lemish, D.	2002	Gender at the forefront: Feminist perspectives on action theoretical approaches in communication research	<i>European Jnl of Comm Research</i> , 27, 63–78
Mifsud, M. L., & Johnson, S. D.	2000	Dialogic, dialectic, and rhetoric: Exploring human dialogue across the discipline	<i>Southern Comm Journal</i> , 65, 91–104
Napoli, P. M.	1997	A principal-agent approach to the study of media organizations: Toward a theory of the media firm	<i>Political Communication</i> , 14, 207–219
Olmsted, A. P.	1998	Words are acts: Critical race theory as a rhetorical construct	<i>Howard Journal of Comm</i> , 9, 323–331
Shome, R., & Hegde, R. S.	2002	Postcolonial approaches to communication: Charting the terrain, engaging the intersections	<i>Communication Theory</i> , 12, 249–270
Wang, G., & Shen, V.	2000	East, West, communication, and theory: Searching for the meaning of searching for Asian communication theories	<i>Asian Journal of Communication</i> , 10, 14–32

Table 3. Communication Theory Exemplars From the Reflexive/Empirical Quadrant

Author	Date	Title	Publication
Anderson, J. A.	2000	The organizational self and the practices of control and resistance	<i>Australian J of Comm</i> , 27, 1-32
Ashcraft, K. L.	2000	Empowering "professional" relationships: Organizational communication meets feminist practice	<i>Mgt. Comm Quarterly</i> , 13, 347-392
Cooren, F., & Taylor, J. R.	1997	Organization as an effect of mediation: Redefining the link between organization and communication	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 7, 219-260
Foot, K. A.	2001	Cultural-historical activity theory as practice theory: Illuminating the development of a conflict-monitoring network	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 11, 56-83
Kuhn, T., & Ashcraft, K. L.	2003	Corporate scandal and the theory of the firm: Formulating the contributions of organizational	<i>Mgt Comm Quarterly</i> , 17, 29-57
McPhee, R. D., & Zaig, P.	2001	Organizational theory, organizational communication, organizational knowledge, and problematic integration	<i>Jrnl of Comm</i> , 51, 574-591
Pearce, W. B., & Pearce, K. A.	2000	Extending the theory of the coordinated management of meaning (CMM) through a community dialogue process	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 10, 405-423
Seyfarth, B.	2000	Structuration theory in small group communication: A review and agenda for future research	<i>Comm Yearbook</i> , 23, 341-379
Shields, D. C.	2000	Symbolic convergence and special communication theories: Sensing and examining dis/enchantment with the theoretical robustness of critical autoethnography	<i>Comm Monographs</i> , 67, 392-421
Stamp, G. H.	1999	A qualitatively constructed interpersonal communication model: A grounded theory analysis	<i>Human Comm Research</i> 25, 531-547
Taylor, J. R.	1999	What is "organizational communication"? Communication as a dialogic of text and conversation	<i>Comm Review</i> , 3, 21-63
Taylor, J. R.	2001	The "rational" organization reconsidered: An exploration of some of the organizational implications of self-organizing	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 11, 137-177
Yerby, J.	1995	Family systems theory reconsidered: Integrating social construction theory and dialectical process	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 5, 339-365

own well-being. Two things change in this quadrant: One is the “upfront” character of the agenda and the other is the switch from locating the call for change in what is true as the foundationalists do to positioning the call in what is right or the moral imperative.

Its standpoint theory is necessarily politically active, using critical and ideologically positioned methods to achieve culturally significant, emancipatory claims that intend value-based social change in a culturally produced reality.

Fifteen entries represented this philosophic quadrant. There was considerable diversity in the topic areas. Four were organizational (and appear to be boundary spanners, connecting to the quadrant above); five treated some epistemological issue; three came from gender studies; and three from media, two of which were under the rubric of cultural studies. Table 4 provides the references.

Implications from the Quadrant Analysis. Clearly the coin of the realm is still foundationalist studies, whether empirical or analytical, more than doubling the work done from a reflexive position (57/28). Some part of this difference is a consequence of the terms of the search. (The primary communication search engines do not, for example, define many quadrant four journals as part of the field;³ the field has not developed the appropriate postmodern journals; and much reflexive work is done in book rather than in serial forms.) Nonetheless, the conclusion that foundationalism predominates still holds.

It is interesting to note that this predominance does not hold across all topic areas. Organizational communication has mostly left the foundationalist hemisphere to populate the reflexive side. Of the 16 organizational studies found, 14 were categorized on the reflexive side. The opposite holds true for both interpersonal and media. The majority of interpersonal work is foundational (17/3) and all of it is empirically based. The relationship per se has apparently not been a focus of the analytical scholar. Finally, of the 18 media studies, 14 were foundational/empirical, indicating a continuing strength of the effects tradition.

Philosophy of Communication: Part 2 —Philosophic Issues in Ontology, Epistemology, Praxeology, and Axiology

The review for this section used the stem of four terms as entries into the databases of *Communication Abstracts* and *The Web of Knowledge Arts and Humanities Citation Index*. As we noted, database searches are shaped by the journals in the database and by the decisions made by both the databases and their journals that intersect the terms of the search. It is likely that the margins as well as the leading and trailing edges of the episteme of communication studies may be over- or underrepresented. With those caveats, the review marches through the four search fields to a description of who we are and what we do in the name of knowledge at the end.

³ For example, *Communication Abstracts* fails to include *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Narrative Inquiry*, or *Cultural Studies*, as well all journals in men's studies. The limits of a search based on this engine are obvious.

Table 4: Communication Theory Exemplars From Reflexive/Analytic Quadrant

Author	Date	Title	Publication
Allen, B. J.	1996	Feminist standpoint theory: A black woman's (re)view of organization socialization	<i>Comm Studies</i> , 47, 257-271
Allen, B. J., Orbe, M. P., & Olivas, M. R.	1999	The complexity of our tears: Dis/enchantment and (in)difference in the academy	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 9, 402-429
Bolter, J. D.	2002	Formal analysis and cultural critique in digital media theory	<i>Convergence</i> , 8, 77-88
Craig, R. T., & Tracey, K.	1995	Grounded practical theory: The case of intellectual discussion	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 5, 248-272
Cronen, V. E.	2001	Practical theory, practical art, and the pragmatic-systemic account of inquiry	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 11, 14-35
Dougherty, D. S., & Krone, K. J.	2000	Overcoming the dichotomy: Cultivating standpoints in organizations through research	<i>Women's Studies</i> , 23, 16-40
Gingrich-Philbrook, C.	1998	On masculinity: Disciplinary violation as gender violation: The stigmatized masculine voice of performance studies	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 8, 203-220
Hawes, L. C.	1999	Dialogics, posthumanist theory, and self-organizing systems	<i>Mgt Comm Quarterly</i> , 13, 146-153
Hearn, G.	1999	Deconstructing modes of communication enquiry	<i>Australian Jnl of Comm</i> , 26, 47-57
Hendriks, A.	2002	Examining the effects of hegemonic depictions of female bodies on television: A call for theory and programmatic research	<i>Critical Studies in Asian Media Comm</i> , 19, 106-123
McQuail, D.	2000	Some reflections on the Western bias of media theory	<i>Asian Journal of Comm</i> , 10, 1-13
Orbe, M. P.	1998	From the standpoint(s) of traditionally muted groups: Explicating a co-cultural communication theoretical model	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 8, 1-26
Pearce, B. W.	1998	On putting social justice in the discipline of communication and putting enriched concepts of communication in social justice research and practice	<i>Journal of Applied Communication Research</i> , 26, 272-278
Taylor, J. R., Cooren, F., Giroux, N., & Robichaud, D.	1996	The communicational basis of organization: Between the conversation and the text	<i>Comm Theory</i> , 6, 1-39
Taylor, J. R., Flanagan, A. J., Cheney, G., & Seibold, D. R.	2001	Organizational communication research: Key moments, central concerns, and future challenges	<i>Comm Yearbook</i> , 24, 99-137

Ontology

Anderson (1996) claimed that every theory must have “an object of explanation” (p. 200). Ontology is the domain of philosophy that seeks to define the fundamental nature of those objects of inquiry. Its focus lies with the nature of the real, that unavoidable starting point for any effort to gain or construct knowledge. All scholarly investigations depend upon boundaries—lines of demarcation that punctuate the endless stream of brute sense data. We depend upon these perceptual borders to separate one object from another, or at least to speak in the first instance of phenomenon, be it a physical object, behavior, mental attribute, or cognitive state, speech code, textual sign, meaning, or culture. Ontology is the exploration of the borders that allow for the study of communication.

We can plot a continuum of ontological assumptions marked by three broad “gravitational clusters,” constellations of like-minded, although not identical, philosophies. The first cluster we label the *foundationalist*. This is the wing of the discipline that holds roughly to the tenets of positivism and Cartesian dualism, envisioning a firm distinction between observer and observed, between the reasoning subject and the reasonable object. For much of communication studies, the objects of inquiry here are mental attributes and states, conceptualized as bounded, operationalizable, and ultimately measurable. We locate both traditions of empirical, behaviorist, and social-psychological communication research as well as media content analysis within this ontological frame. The foundationalist umbrella further can be extended to include those varieties of both Kantian rationalism and vulgar Marxism that see an extracommunicative structure independent of will, action, or language as providing the underlying foundation for human endeavors within the world. All of these branches of foundationalist ontology relegate communication itself to a referential or instrumental role—language and speech function either to refer to an already existent reality or as a more or less strategic means to an end.

The second gravitational cluster along the ontological continuum we identify as the *communicative*. This is the wing of the discipline that sees language and communication neither as referential nor post priori, but as ontologically constitutive. This line of thinking builds on the tradition of Wittgenstein’s (1958) “language games,” the notion that language of the world is inseparable from action within the world and that together language/action is foundational for human experience, perception, thought, and behavior. A communicative ontology holds that individuals are primarily linguistic beings who exist within and through dialogue and interaction. Here we locate ethnographic traditions of symbolic interactionism, social action, speech codes, and other branches of “interpretive modernism” (Mumby, 1997) that see communicative action and localized patterns of shared meanings as the fundamental objects of explanation.

The third cluster on our continuum we call the *discursive*. This grouping of philosophical thought takes the final step away from the foundational, arguing that ontology lacks any grounding either in an a priori phenomenal world of bounded objects or in constitutive patterns of language/action. Instead, there are only discourses—only the semiotic—with ontology reduced to ungoverned, un-

predictable, and ever-shifting processes of representation. This is the postmodern domain of Derridean slippage, in which we exist primarily within a world of meanings, but meanings that are unanchored and unstable. It is a world of Baudrillard's simulacrum in which signs lack exteriority and the punctuations among objects continually blur and reform but temporarily. Ontology here is disassociated from a consistent and reliable center, from a mooring of any kind, and rearticulated instead as the domain of ephemeral cultural expression.

Review. Underlying the ontological debate is the central theme of the contemporary challenge to any sense of ontological certainty. Foundational assumptions are reassuring, they suggest a space of ontological security in which one can be certain that one stands, so to speak, on firm ground, that the real exists and awaits its discovery. When ontology is shifted, however, from the material and the biological to the domain of language and action, the real must be reconceptualized, not as preexistent, but as socially constructed, not as universally singular, but as contingent upon communicative contexts and therefore local and unavoidably multiple. In turn, if ontology is unmoored from the anchors of social action, we have moved into a space of fundamental ontological insecurity in which the real becomes merely the realistic, subject to a continual process of social de- and reconstruction.

The reactions to the complication, if not loss, of ontological certainty are, not surprisingly, mixed. For some, the contemporary splintering of ontological assumptions is seen to pose a threat to any attempt to speak with surety about what is. We see in the literature a desire to reaffirm foundational roots, to insist on a retreat from a notion of ontological relativity (Hikins, 1999; Moore, 1999). Others, however, have argued that the unavoidable turn toward the global and the multicultural, both within and outside of the academy, necessitates a rethinking of ontology. For some, the increasing hybridization of domains of language/action and culture contains empowering ontological implications, opening previously closed avenues to reconsider our efforts both to speak of and to live within the world (see, for example, Allen, Orbe, & Olivas, 1999).

A related line of exploration here suggests that the loss of ontological certainty is not merely the concern of scholars, but has become a substantive issue outside the academy (Cohen & Metzger, 1998), one that we suggest underlies much of the cultural politics of the time. Investigations along these lines have suggested that contemporary media texts such as the television series *The X-Files* (Bellon, 1999) and the film *The Matrix* (Stroud, 2001) explicitly grapple with questions of ontology, opening popular spaces within which to reconsider traditional assumptions.

Central to these popular ontological debates is the increasing integration of the internet, digital technologies, the cyber, and the virtual in daily practices. A third area of examination we identify in the literature is the question of whether the *cyber* itself constitutes a new ontological domain (Manovich, 1999; Strate, 1999). Such a notion is unthinkable from a foundationalist perspective, which we suggest cannot allow for ontological change from the vantages of communicative or discursive ontologies. However, the cyber could contain its own ontological dimensions if it truly constitutes a new domain of language/action or a new set of cultural practices. The implications of this line of thinking are far reaching. New

technologies truly become a revolution if they place people not just within a virtual reality, but within a new real altogether.

Implications. Our review of the literature suggests that disagreements over ontology comprise the primary lines of fissure in the discipline of communication, widening gulfs that serve to deepen the divisions among various branches of the field. We see ontology as the scaffolding upon which structures of scholarship are crafted. Communication research and theory built upon divergent ontological assumptions envision a different world at its core and are in search of fundamentally different objects of explanation. Such incompatible ontological starting points, we suggest, render cross-continuum conversations and partnerships all but impossible, further fracturing a discipline, which as we noted earlier, is already held together not by paradigmatic coherence, but by tenuous administrative arrangements.

The question in play here is not simply a matter of disciplinary cohesiveness, but of disciplinary significance. A foundational ontology renders communication itself ontologically vacant (Mumby, 1997), a vessel that can be more or less filled, but one lacking in substance. For the foundationalist, communication is at best a second-order effect, always reducible to psychology, biology, or physics, explainable in the final instance by the tools, techniques, and focus of other disciplines. Communicative and discursive ontologies, by contrast, see communication as irreducible to the traditional hard sciences and prior to sociology, politics, economics, and the other sciences of the social. Such ontologies demand that careful attention be paid to dialogue among people and organizations and to media discourse, for those are seen to be the constituent levels of human experience. We endorse the argument that only communicative and discursive ontologies can sustain the field of communication. If ours, however, is indeed a discipline that on balance remains committed to a foundationalist ontology, then we continue to undercut our own relevance within the wider academy.

Epistemology

Inseparable from our understandings of the real are the assumptions about knowledge that shape any effort to comprehend phenomena. Epistemology is the study of those assumptions: the inquiry into the character of knowledge, the nature of acceptable evidence, and the criterion of validity that enable one to distinguish the false from the true, the probable from the actual. In the domain of Western philosophical inquiry, the study of epistemology has been concerned with determining the necessary and sufficient conditions that must be met for a given statement to be accepted as true. In recent communication scholarship the term is used more broadly to refer to the processes, conditions, and criteria by which one legitimately can be said to know. Our review suggests that contemporary philosophies of epistemology can be located along a continuum that tracks closely, although not identically, with the spectrum of ontological assumptions discussed in the previous section. Again, we can demarcate three broad schools of epistemological thought that arrange and direct most efforts in communication research, criticism, and inquiry.

The foundationalist end of the continuum relies on absolute and universal foundations to distinguish true knowledge from mere belief, be they empirical—

an insistence that the fact of the matter is self-evident—or the rational—which sees the real perhaps not as obvious, but as inherently deducible. Knowledge here is a question of accurate representation, of correspondence between understanding and existence. Foundationalists hold to a set of basic assumptions about the nature of knowledge. First, it is singular and reductionist. In a singularly existing universe, myriad surface phenomena ultimately should be explainable by a limited set of true statements, that is, a single body of knowledge corresponding to a finite real (e.g., Shapiro, 2002). So too is knowledge seen as progressive and correctible, moving inevitably along a linear path from less knowledge and worse understandings to more knowledge and better understandings. Knowledge is assumed to have an end point, that moment when all questions would be answered and all phenomena explained. Finally, knowledge is both individuated and transcendent: individuated because it is housed within the mind of the individual, but transcendent because truth cannot be contained or limited to the individual. Rather, the individual here is assumed to be capable of forging a nonproblematic link between his or her own mind and the reality that transcends it.

Although a foundationalist epistemology functions as the default assumption for most work in the social sciences, one can also identify a turn toward a social epistemology within the more humanistic wing of the discipline. The move from a paradigm of absolute foundations to one of social agreement aligns with the endorsement of a communicative ontology discussed above. If the real is neither singular nor universal but bounded by localized practices of language and action, then knowledge must be rethought, not as correspondence with an *a priori* truth, but as itself a language game. Knowledge here is understood not as the product of an objective and rational engagement with reality, but the result of intersubjective or communal agreement. A social epistemology understands truth as existing within specific epistemic communities, whereas the test of validity is less a measure of accuracy and more a social process of justification. In this frame the location of knowledge is shifted from the mind of the individual knower to the communicative processes through which that mind is constructed. Further, knowledge inevitably is multiple; standards of evidence and criteria of justification exist only within communities of acceptance and often are incompatible across local epistemic boundaries.

The third broad school of epistemic thought we identify here agrees with the insights of the social epistemologist, but adds the critical dimension that knowledge always is a product of power. An ideological epistemology thus moves from a Wittgensteinian notion of language games to a Foucauldian conception of games of truth. Here all knowledge is seen as political, the result of implicit rules and practices governing what counts as knowledge and who is entitled to speak truth. Conventions of evidence, warrantability, and certainty become ideological constructs lacking basis either in empirical reality or in some sense of an organic life of a community. Instead, knowledge is seen as enabled and articulated from within a complex network of power relations. Justification is a question of discourse, its allocation always an exercise of power that benefits some at the expense of others.

Review. Our review suggests that epistemology provides the richest area of discussion in the contemporary literature of communication philosophy. The

overarching theme that emerges is the interrogation of a rationalist foundationalism and the exploration of its alternatives.

Among those alternatives is a narrative-based epistemology. Although Fisher's (1984) original statement of the narrative paradigm as an opposition to rationality largely has fallen out of favor, the notion of narrative as a fundamental frame for understanding remains an important thread in the discussion (Detweiler & Peyton, 1999; Sunwolf, 1999). Similarly, much attention is being paid to the role of the visual in contemporary knowledge (Sullivan, 1998; Vivian, 1999). Here the suggestion is that as dominant media practices and technologies have become more and more visually oriented, the visual has supplanted linear verbal argument as the central means of knowing and constructing arguments about the world. Arguments along these lines stem in part from the domain of media ecology and draw tight connections between the nature of a society's primary media technologies and its authorized forms of knowledge. Such a position contains significant implications as computer-mediated communication becomes further integrated into daily practices. Thus a related area of interest here is the potential of new media technologies to engender new and potentially unforeseen ways of knowing (Howard, 2002; Soukup, 2000).

Another response to the primacy of rationalist knowledge has been the turn toward a feminist or standpoint epistemology (Cooper, 2001; Hayden, 1997). Work in standpoint epistemology originates from the ideological camp, arguing that rationalist knowledge is both patriarchal and hegemonic, an expression not of an unbiased search for truth but of the sociocultural power of its advocates. The standpoint epistemologist maintains that such "knowledge from the center" is partial, incomplete, and exclusionary. The effort here is to deconstruct dominant epistemic assumptions while exploring knowledges from the margins: the emotional, affective, and situated, gained through the immediacy of lived experience rather than the dispassionate logic of objective thought. The truths that can be found in the epistemological margins, the argument here suggests, may ultimately be richer, perhaps more complete, than the understandings generated within the epistemic center.

It is in that last point, however, that standpoint epistemology raises intriguing questions. It appears to be locatable both within the ideological wing of the continuum and the foundational end: ideological because it suggests that the dominance of rationalist knowledge has always been the result of historical privilege, but foundational because at heart it insists that marginal knowledge ultimately may correspond more accurately to the true nature of the real. Thus it argues simultaneously that truth is both the product of sociocultural privilege and a thing of this world, accessible in fewer or greater degrees. Standpoint epistemology further sits precariously at the fulcrum between relativity and essentialism, between commonality and difference. While it seeks to explore epistemological differences, it also suggests that as a marginalized group, women share certain epistemological attributes and understandings. The problematic of essentialism is further revealed by the development of a Black feminist epistemology (Davis, 1998; Hamlet, 2000), which suggests that characteristics of biology or race may determine both the form and the substance of one's knowledge. Such an argument, we

suggest, is untenable without recourse to the totalizing assumptions standpoint epistemology seeks to reject. The foundational and essentializing tendencies therefore raise difficult contradictions to the valuable insight that those in the epistemological center have much to learn from those on the margins.

Implications. We see in the turn toward epistemic multiplicity significant implications for any endeavor that seeks to determine “what is” with some measure of certainty. Thus we find it not surprising that journalism studies appears to be the wing of the discipline most explicitly interested in contemporary epistemological thought. There the debate turns on questions of the epistemic underpinnings of broadcast journalism (Ekstrom, 2002); the role of narrative, emotional, and situated knowledge (Aucoin, 2001; Baym, 2003); the possibilities, and for some necessities, of rationalist objectivity (Cunningham, 1999; Moore, 1999; Ryan, 2001); and the relevance of standpoint epistemology for the journalistic enterprise (Durham, 1998). We also see a measure of attention being paid to the implications of multiple epistemologies for the domain of scholarship itself (Allen, Orbe, & Olivas, 1999; Hearn, 1999; Lotz, 2000). For many, an acknowledgment of the limitations of the rationalist paradigm demands a reevaluation of the methods of knowledge production, which we consider more fully in the following section.

There is also a tension underlying current epistemic thought that we find simultaneously intriguing and potentially threatening to the scholarly endeavor. Here the issue turns on the role of authority in shaping what counts as knowledge. As we have noted, much contemporary epistemology seeks to problematize any claim to epistemic authority, to challenge any insistence on a privileged position from which to speak truth. Although such a line of thinking admirably seeks to empower voices from the margins, when applied reflexively, it leads to a dangerous questioning of the privilege of academic standing upon which scholarship relies. It would reject the cultural capital of a doctoral education, the propriety of the review process through which our work is developed and published, and the hierarchy of institutional promotion and tenure. Although undoubtedly the structures of the contemporary academy could benefit from careful reevaluation, even the simple act of writing a sentence that claims to describe “what is” (such as this one) is a claim to epistemic authority. Can, then, we have knowledge without the biases of knowledge production? Such are the questions raised, but we suggest unanswered, by current scholarship in epistemology.

Praxeology

Mises (1949) defined praxeology as a general theory of human action. It is the “science of means not of ends” (p. 15). As a science it is concerned with the a prioris of choice and preference. Applied to knowledge, praxeology is interested in the “economics of the means of knowledge.” Praxeology, therefore, directs one’s attention to questions of why we have the empirical and analytical theories and methodologies that we do, what the work of each produces, and the object and use value that each returns. The disciplinary expression of these issues has been the typical “my theory/methodology is better than yours,” a tedious sort of contention until one begins to examine the bases by which authors would make that claim.

For example, the current state of the discipline with an ever-burgeoning number of theories⁴ and shades of methodology is readily understood as a function of an overabundance of object value and an underabundance of use value. Discipline and scholar alike need theory for its intrinsic value as an emblem of our disciplinarity and scholarship. At the same time the instrumentality of even our best theories is so low that each takes up little space on the spectrum of use value allowing yet another to be entered.

Review. Foundationalists consider such arguments to be anathema, not wishing to be seen as human agents of a human practice (see, for example, Murray & Wartella's [1999] sharp reply to Bergan & Grimes's [1999] cultural analysis of effects research). They would much prefer to be seen as operators of a transcendental method acutely attuned to an independent but responsive reality. We see this philosophic positioning in the articles of Hullett and Levine (2003) or Denham (2002). Both of these were concerned with the appropriate error terms for certain statistical analyses and argued that a better approximation of reality is achieved by one procedure rather than another. Ritchie (2003) called this an application of the metaphor of statistical probability as a referent for epistemic certainty.

Foundationalists anchor one end of a continuum of justified practice that reaches across the self-empowerment/enlightenment of contemporary ethnography to the practical value of applied research to the political action of standpoint epistemology. The work of Andersen, Guerrero, Buller, and Jorgensen (1998) gave us a good example of the foundationalist approach, comparing cognitive valence theory, discrepancy arousal theory, and expectancy violations theory and finding no support for any one of them. The foundationalist conclusion has to be that the data are true (the voice of reality) and either (or both) the theories are false or the protocol defective.

Ashcraft's work (2000) on empowerment within a feminist organization offered the enlightenment of a better way of doing things organizationally and theoretically. Finding that feminist organizations maintain the boundary between the public and private (organizational and relational life) criticized by feminist theory, she suggested revisions to theory and to practice. On the face of it, both Andersen et al. and Ashcraft did the same work (used empirical data to find theory false), but Andersen et al. cannot be part of the relationships they studied, whereas Ashcraft will assist her sisters (and brothers) to a better life.

Cronen (2001) took us further along this utility continuum by directing the work of theory to the improvement of human systems. Cronen has had a long association with Barnett Pearce, whose own work (Pearce, 2000; Pearce & Pearce 2000) has taken on a similar stance, centering social justice. Cragen (1999) took us further from the foundationalist end by speaking theory in the same breath as "real world problems" and "practical outcomes." We have moved from a distanced objectivity to the business of fixing things.

⁴ Anderson recently conducted a 10-year review of *Human Communication Research* over the topic of "relationships" and found over 40 different named theories in play for that one topic in that one journal.

Our final step is into deliberate political action. This is a step into the domains of strong standpoint epistemology, postmodern theory, as well as critical and cultural studies. With the exception of some feminism (Allen 1996; Dougherty & Krone, 2000; Gaternby, 1996; Hallstein, 1999; Hegde, 1998; Kitzinger, 1999; Sallot, 2002) and critical rhetoric (Flores, 2000; Hasian & Delgado 1998; Hasian & Flores, 2000; McKerrow, 1999; Schiappa, 2001), one has to step out of the institutionally declared territories of communication to read the action. Conquergood (2002) set the stage well in his article on performance studies, arguing that our agenda must collapse the divide “between practical knowledge (knowing how), propositional knowledge (knowing that) and political savvy (knowing who, when, and where)” (p. 153). Perhaps if we had the politics of the low countries of Europe, we would see this scholarship as the platforms of political parties. Instead it is an argument at the margins.

Implications. From Woolbert (1917) to Hyde (1929) to Krippendorff (1969) to Burgoon (1989) to Craig (1999) the conversation over what are the proper practices of scholarship has continued without any slack or conclusion. The postmodern turn has not only added some new voices but also lowered the volume if not the certainty of traditional participants. We have always been and are more so now a discipline of communities of practice. The implications for what we publish and teach are indicting. Few sites of either activity achieve the breadth that represents the discipline.

Axiology

Axiology—or value theory in contemporary philosophy—considers the basis of “good” choice and allows us to examine the rationales for action. Just as epistemology and ontology are inextricably entwined (one cannot have knowledge unless it is about something), so are praxeology and axiology (one cannot have right practices without value). An example of the sort of discussion that axiology would moderate might be the scientific modernist claim that objectivity is good and the scientific postmodernist answer that objectivity may be good, but it is not possible, and, therefore, it is both deceptive and silencing of inquiry (for examples, see Bostrom & Donohew, 1992; Ekstrom, 2002; Lannamann, 1991; or Ryan, 2001).

Review. Given their imbricated character, it is not surprising that questions of value arise at every practical turn. Given that questions of value preclude action, it is not surprising that much of the discussion of value occurs at the margins—in keynote addresses (Wood, 1998), introductions to special issues (Frey, 1998), most especially backstage in the reviews for presentations and publications (Blair, Brown, & Baxter, 1994), and in the instruction and disciplining of the novitiate (Engen, 2002; Oteiza, 2003). The most centered presentation of value occurs in the one community’s complaints against another (Hallstein, 1999; Kitzinger, 1999; Schudson, 1997; Taft-Kaufman, 1995), in the call for action (Guttman, 1997; Kepplinger & Knirsch, 2001; Lemish, 2002; Mejias, 2001; Olsen, Weber, & Trimble, 2002; Wright, 2001), or in the critical performance review of a theory or methodology (Babrow, 2001; Condit, Condit, & Achter 2001; Cragan, 1999; McPhee & Zaug, 2001; Wilder, 2002).

Typically, the first of these progresses through a characterization of the other, whose actions are shown to promote unacceptable values. For example, scholarly feminists Gring-Pemble and Blair (2000) complained that “popular press feminists” create double binds and rigid dichotomies that suppress legitimate inquiry. The typical complaint is built on an exnominated foundation that presumably escapes careful scrutiny but, in fact, is revealed in the dichotomy of “us and them.”

The call for action usually occurs at the intersection of some crises, some environmental change, some threat or opportunity. Worley and Chesebro (2002) saw the confluence of the internet and the basic course a grand opportunity for community building within the communication discipline. Echoing larger instructional movements toward the exchange of learning objects (Acker & Gynn, 2003), Worley and Chesebro saw the construction of this archive of content as the basis of a coming together of the discipline. Of course, Worley and Chesebro could advance this argument only from the position that all content has the same epistemological foundation. Anderson (2003) has argued that such an archive would be either unreadable diversity or self-serving reduction, as are our current basic texts.

Finally, Peters (2001) gave us a good example of the critical review of performance in his analysis of the political action of quantitative methods. Critical reviews, like the one you are reading, usually “write from nowhere”—the polemic having lost its honest reputation. Nonetheless, the pattern of choices of issues and representatives lay out the unmistakable impact of value. Peters built his argument on the narrative of conflict between objective and humanistic methods. There is little doubt about whom the author wants to win.

Implications. Axiology is the bloody stage of politics in scholarship. As Fish (1994) has pointed out, we engage difference, attack difference, tolerate difference, and ignore difference within ranges defined by a political economy. We get excited about a new idea; we hold zero tolerance for intolerance; we politely accept your right to speak; and we do not read shoddy scholarship. In a discipline of communities such as ours, this set of four positions gets repeated for any claim that can be made. It is an infinite rotation of Figure 4.⁵

This political economy of debate and indifference is exacerbated by values detached from utility. Lacking the anchors of instrumentality, values float (Barthes, 1975) to be appropriated by whomever for whatever purpose. Consequently truth becomes a statistical routine or a resonating narrative or a well-crafted argument recognized by a self-congratulating community rather than something accomplished in the larger social realm.

It was the latter accomplishment that was the power of first- and second-wave feminism and the cause for their laments for what has followed. Media effects forged those links into the agenda of others, giving it standing despite repeated assaults from within. For most, that accomplishment remains the challenge.

⁵ We hear the muttering of voices complaining about postmodern relativism or masculine metaphors of territory. We respect the right of those voices to be heard, but we don't care to listen.

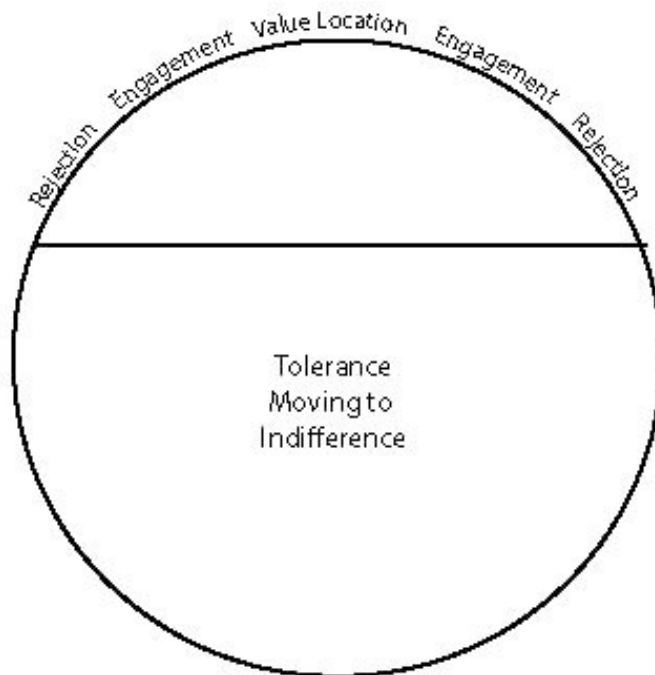


Figure 4. Action toward difference.

Some Closing Thoughts

The circle we call communication is a highly and increasingly segmented figure. The good of this is that voices are now heard that were silent or silenced only a decade ago. The bad is that for every voice added there are fewer members of the community to listen. We run some risk of the infinite segmentation of, say, literary studies.

It is interesting to note that this diversity is best seen from some distance. Topical domains such as interpersonal or organizational communication seem to be more one thing than any other. Whereas in critical rhetoric and cultural studies, the sameness is the unwillingness to hold to a center.

The lesson we have learned is that none of us can lay claim to being *a* communication scholar as each of us must be *some kind* of communication scholar. We divide widely across knowledge claims, practices, and values. What anchor us best and give us the continued right to call ourselves a discipline are the common objects of our study—the texts, performances, relationships, organizations, and media about which we communicate. Despite our differences in ontology, it is there that we ultimately find our greatest degree of commonality. Whether foundational or socially constructed, we agree that somehow these things are there and worthy of our attention.

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