

# Exploring the Intersections of Individual and Collective Communication Design: A Research Agenda

Joshua B. Barbour

*The University of Texas at Austin, USA*

Rebecca Gill

*Massey University, New Zealand*

J. Kevin Barge

*Texas A&M University, USA*

## **ABSTRACT**

The goal of this chapter is to articulate an agenda for the study of collective communication design. The chapter begins with an introduction to communication as design (CAD) and then presents distinctions between individual and collective objects and subjects of communication design. Messages, interaction architectures, moments, and flows are explored as categories of communication design activity. The chapter ends with a discussion of CAD as normative, practical theory, and makes the case that communication effectiveness depends on communicators' reflexivity, the sophistication of their models of communication, and their skill for and ability to enact preferred designs for communication. The intersections between individual and collective communication design should empower theoretical efforts to understand and explain interventions in organizing through communication.

Keywords: Organizational Communication, Theory, Communication as Design (CAD), Collective Communication Design, Practical Theory, Normative Theory, Institutional Theory

## COMMUNICATION AS DESIGN

Changing how individuals and collectives communicate can change the organizations and institutions with which they are involved. In particular, communication theory and research can empower individual and collective agency in enacting communicative interventions by helping understand how communicators make particular choices, and how they might make different ones. To do this, organizational communication researchers need to reconsider how individuals as well as groups, communities, and organizations create and refine messages and communication tools, as well as how they make choices about individual and collective objects of communication design, how they negotiate the goals, ideals, and logics relevant to those choices, and the implications of their choices for their ability to execute them in practice. Communication as design (CAD) brings attention not just to communication but to communicators' choices about how they are communicating. CAD approaches can shed light on communication itself while also opening up communication as a site of intervention.

Design occurs when actors attempt to transform “something given into something preferred through intervention and invention,” and communication design “happens when there is an intervention into some ongoing activity through the invention of techniques, devices, and procedures that aim to redesign interactivity and thus shape the possibilities for communication” (Aakhus, 2007, p. 112). A CAD approach is a form of practical theory in that it can empower more useful and just forms of communication, address difficult social problems, and “open up new possibilities for action” (Barge & Craig, 2009, p. 55). CAD approaches are descriptive but are also normative (Craig & Tracy, 1995, 2014; Edwards, Donovan, & Reis, 2013; Goldsmith, 2001) in the sense that design seeks choices and performances that reflect ideals of practice. These choices about communication can be informed by an understanding or critique of what is,

and also a vision for what could or might be (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005; Henver, March, Park, & Ram, 2004; Nelson & Stolterman, 2012). CAD approaches jibe with the fundamental impulse to communicate well, to enact communicative action and practice in a way that achieves individuals' and organizations' desired ends (Craig & Tracy, 1995, 2014).

At the same time, communication design happens not just in specific moments of strategic and conscious intervention. Communicators make choices about their communication at all times as they, for example, connect with loved ones, seek help and advice in peer support, or talk about work problems. Harrison (2014) highlighted a relevant distinction between communication design as a process and a fact:

*. . . the process of design is about the intentional creation of a communication interaction, system, or process. But elements of design may also emerge from interaction, or appear accidentally, and so design consists of particular elements of content, structure, and order that exist separate from the intentional process of creation, and thus exist as fact. (p. 2)*

At the same time, communication design is not synonymous with strategic action or decision-making in general. Put simply, communication design entails communicative objects such as messages, interaction formats, communication tools and technologies, and communication processes and policies.

As such, all communicative action involves design, or actors making choices about how and what they will communicate. The broad applicability of design approaches makes it all the more important for us to delineate what a focus on design includes and what it does not. This is particularly necessary because the study of communication design should be understood as part of but distinct from the study of

communication more generally. Whereas communication research, broadly speaking, attends to the processes and effects of communicating, a concern for design is a concern for how and why actors make choices with the aim of creating particular processes and effects. For example, the study of health campaigns typically focuses on the *effects* of campaigns, not the *communicative processes* that constitute those campaigns. Likewise, the study of messages in general is distinct from, but related to, the study of message *production processes*. That said, it is certainly the case that the study of communication design can generate insight about communication more broadly, and it need not be limited to conscious, aware, reflective designing as such. That is, in making choices about communication, actors may or may not be aware of their choices, and yet nonetheless do make choices about communication to achieve particular goals (Bingham & Burleson, 1989; Hollingshead, Costa, & Beck, 2007; Kellermann, 1992; Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Feng, 2007). Moreover, communicators may or may not reflect on their choices, though a great deal of communication research emphasizes the usefulness of reflection for more effective communicative action (Barge, 2004; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016).

In sum, communication design can be emergent and/or informal as well as planned and/or formal (Aakhus, 2007). Furthermore, inasmuch as interaction is a source of design elements, communication designers do not always make choices alone or in isolation. It is an oversimplification to conceptualize designers solely as solitary individuals who engage in design as a chiefly cognitive enterprise, because design itself can also be a collective, interactive enterprise (Nelson & Stolterman, 2012; Thompson, Steier, & Ostrinko, 2014). In design industries, teams outnumber isolated designers, and design education increasingly seeks to

prepare future designers for collaborative work (Ahmed & Wallace, 2004; Bracewell, Wallace, Moss, & Knott, 2009; Cross, 2008; Dym, Agogino, Eris, Frey, & Leifer, 2005; Lahti, Seitamaa-Hakkarainen, & Hakkarainen, 2004; Tranfield & Smith, 2002). The goal in this chapter is therefore to provide theoretical resources for conceptualizing the individual and collective subjects and objects of communication design (see Table 1).

## **OBJECTS OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN**

Identifying and explicating specific objects of design is an early and iterative aspect of design thinking, design science, and design methods (e.g., Aakhus & Jackson, 2005; Brown & Katz, 2009; March & Storey, 2008). Selecting an object of design establishes the scope of choices about communication to be made and focuses attention on specific designable features or choice points. Without that scope, it is easy to get lost in overlapping, contingent, and multilevel areas of communication design.

Thompson et al.'s (2014) study of a learning exhibit of a science center, for example, brought attention not just to the creation of messaging and forms of interaction at the center, which were complex on their own, but also the participatory processes through which stakeholders made choices about the exhibits *and* the choices made about that the participatory process. They argued, “attending to the conceptual phase of design (of things and of communication) through both a communication stance and a design stance offer complementary perspectives...” (p. 16). As such, the outcomes of participatory design processes could include not just the “designed space or object” but also “new possibilities of interaction that emerge through intervention of the design processes, the communication processes, the constituents of the design objects, or other interventions” (p. 17). The potential designable features of communication are infinite (for a relevant parallel, see arguments about the potentially infinite

variability of messages, Jackson, 1992). Establishing the object of communication design under analysis helps wrangle the myriad potential foci of analysis.

A key conceptual distinction is between objects of design as (a) specific communicative actions and (b) clusters of communicative action. First, objects of design can be discrete communicative actions such as particular messages generated in everyday language (Barbour, Jacocks, & Wesner, 2013; Caughlin et al., 2008; O'Keefe, 1988), and specifically in health campaigns (Harrison, 2014), interprofessional communication (Barbour, Gill, & Dean, 2016; Dean, Gill, & Barbour, 2016), social support messages (Goldsmith, 2004), public affairs narratives (Barbour, Doshi, & Hernandez, 2016), or the contents of science museum exhibits (Thompson et al., 2014). The discrete communicative action built into interaction formats or tools may also be thought of as individual objects of design. These formats or tools for interaction could include group decision support systems (Aakhus, 2001), online platforms for social support (Aakhus & Rumsey, 2010), ombuds processes (Harrison, 2013), safety meeting formats (Barbour & Gill, 2014), stakeholder engagement processes (Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015), formats for public deliberation (Sprain, Carcasson, & Merolla, 2014), strategies for patient handoffs (Apker, Ptacek, Beach, & Wears, 2016; Dean et al., 2016), and planned experiences at science museum exhibits (Thompson et al., 2014).

Second, clusters of communicative action can also be collective objects of design. Previous research has clustered communicative action by, for example, practice (Leonardi, 2015), flow (McPhee & Zaug, 2000), and genre (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). Campaigning, safety oversight, and stakeholder engagement are constituted by multiple communicative actions and these clusters of communicative action can also be the focus of choices about how communication should be enacted (Craig & Tracy, 2014; Leonardi, 2015). Communication

campaigns provide a helpful exemplar of the distinction (Rice & Atkin, 2013). Such campaigns involve the careful crafting of particular messages (e.g., different ways of communicating the effects of homeowner's building decisions on storm water management), and they also include the selection of formats and tools central to the campaign that entail multiple messages (e.g., an app to communicate information about storm water management decisions, Scott et al., 2014).

Harrison (2014) captured this complexity, for instance, in describing multi-organization worksite organ donation campaigns (see also, Harrison et al., 2011a). Even though campaign messages "used similar constructions and principles, each organization received a unique campaign based on an appraisal of the organization that included assessments of the physical layout, the information structures, and the nature of task and social relationships within the organization" (p. 6). Thus, efforts in the campaign focused on specific elements that theory and research indicated could make a difference, but the campaigning overall, as a space of multiple forms of communicative action, encompassed much more.

In another organ donation campaign focused on drivers licensing bureaus, Harrison et al. (2011b) explained:

*All steps leading up to a final interaction with a clerk must be considered as these steps are part of ongoing interactions that shape proceeding communication. These steps are influenced by the physical layout of SOS offices, and include activities and interactions such as entering the SOS offices, standing in line, reading materials, being greeted, moving from one line to another, and ending with the final interaction with the clerk who completes the desired transactions.*  
*(pp. 807-808)*

The communicative facets of each step in this (always incomplete) list each imply designable features of communication. Campaigning in these examples is ultimately comprised of many discrete, designable communicative actions that, together, comprise “campaigning.” This distinction between specific communicative actions and clusters of communicative actions as objects of design reflects the range and scope of foci that entail choices about communication and embody an infinity of designable features of messages, interactivity, and flows of communication.

## **SUBJECTS OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN**

Inasmuch as the objects of communication design are the foci of choices about communication, the subjects of communication design are the actors involved in making those choices about communication. A principal contention of this chapter is that communication design processes differ depending on that subject. The distinction the chapter seeks to make here is between individual and collective subjects, or individual and collective designers. This distinction, though not often acknowledged (Barbour & Gill, 2014; Jackson & Aakhus, 2014) can be straightforward. For example, individual language production and evaluation (i.e., message design, O’Keefe, 1988) is clearly different from the work of a team or organization designing a health campaign (Backer & Rogers, 1993; Harrison, 2014).

Although the two types of subjects may be distinct, they may be related to each other. Individual language production and evaluation reflects and has implications for organizational and institutional phenomena (Barbour et al., 2013; O’Keefe, Lambert, & Lambert, 1997). The cognitive and emotive processes of the individual designer (e.g., Brown & Katz, 2009; Nelson & Stolterman, 2012) has, in other domains, received a great deal of attention, as has the work of design teams (e.g., Cross, 2008; Faraj & Sproull, 2000; Lahti et al., 2004; Walz, Elam, & Curtis,



1993). Ultimately, individual design work may be more or less internally or externally oriented, collective subjects vary (e.g., teams, bureaucracies, networks), and individual and collective design processes are intertwined in that individual action comprises and constitutes collective communication design.

The broader point is that collectives—groups, organizations, networks, and communities—can be the designers of communication. Returning to the example of communication campaigns, they are comprised of the collective activity of individual communicators producing and evaluating messages during the planning, execution, and evaluation of the campaign. And as such, these microsocial communicative actions influence the form and outcome of the campaign as a whole. At the same time, the campaign involves a team of campaigners working together to make choices about communication and carry them off (e.g., Backer & Rogers, 1993; Harrison et al., 2011a). These choices enable, constrain, and interact with the microsocial processes of individual campaigners. The designs and design process that individuals employ are in a reflexive relationship with the designs created by the team, as each influence the other.

Aakhus and Rumsey's (2010) analysis of the performance of social support online provides another example. They argued, "supportive communication in online communities is a collective achievement of the community members collaboratively crafting modes of interaction that enable forms of supportive communication" (p. 67). Individual communicators designed and made communicative contributions online that influenced the tenor of the discussions. As a collective, the communicators argued about what social support ought and ought not to look like. As part of this, they argued about particular messages and the platform itself. In their analysis,

Aakhus and Rumsey identified three struggles about communication with implications for this community's realization of supportive communication:

*A struggle over who has the right to criticize highlighted differences about appropriate communicative acts; a struggle over the role of venting highlighted differences over expected sequences of acts; and a struggle over the value of disagreement highlighted differences over the expected epistemic aims of interaction. (p. 74)*

The individual communicators and the collective as a whole attempted to make and enact choices about communication, and the foci of their choices included individual, discrete communicative actions as well as holistic, meaningful, recognizable clusters of communicative action.

Table 1

*Potential Foci of Communication as Design Research*

Design Subjects	Design Objects	
	Individual	Collective
<b>Individual</b>	Individual choices about discrete messages, interaction formats, and communication tools	Individual contributions to collective choices about messaging, flows, and interaction architectures
<b>Collective</b>	Collective negotiation of the contents and form of discrete messages, interaction formats, and communication tools	Collective negotiation of collective choices about messaging, flows, and interaction architectures

The metaphor of a chorus may be useful for further illustration. Members of a chorus sing notes, which are discernible as separate and discrete to listeners (individual subject/individual object, see Table 1). These notes constitute the flow of music that listeners experience. At the same time, members make choices about how the group will sing. Each singer makes choices beyond just their own performance, oriented to carrying off the shared performance (individual subject/collective object). They listen, and they adjust. The individual singers comprise the chorus and seek to sing as one, and listeners in and outside of the chorus experience a cohesive song (collective subject/individual object). The chorus also makes choices as a collective about how it will sing. Those choices reflect shared ideas about how the music ought to be composed held by members, soloists, directors, conductors, and so on. The chorus has to try to carry the tune as envisioned. The song reflects more than the impulse of any one person and more than the voices simply added together (collective designer/collective object).

## **CATEGORIES OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN ACTIVITY**

Analyzing the individual and collective distinctions in the objects and subjects can help disentangle the overlapping, contingent, and multilevel areas of communication design. To illustrate this point, the chapter turns next to elaborating the distinctions and the implications for the study of categories of communication design activity. The section seeks to unpack the individual and collective character of the design of messages, interaction architectures, and communicative moments and flows as well as the particular complications associated with collective communication design.

### **Messages**

Discrete messages can reflect individual and collective design activity. Messages are “collations of thoughts,” and individual message design is the “local management of the flow of

thought—both the management of [one's] own thoughts by the message producer and the management of the other's thought in the service of communicative goals" (O'Keefe & Lambert, 1995, p. 55). Studying particular messages involves the study of relationships between the specific contents of messages (i.e., the symbols used), the intended action, and realized effects. In complex communicative situations, individuals have to negotiate multiple, at times contradictory, goals (e.g., Caughlin et al., 2008; Edwards et al., 2013). The negotiation of those goals depends in part on the slippery relationship between messages and meaning (O'Keefe, 1997).

Conceiving of messages as collations, on the other hand, recognizes that messages can include multiple contradictory elements and reflect multiple levels of human experience. Particular messages need not be functional or coherent, because "the field of thoughts may or may not be functional and coherent" (O'Keefe & Lambert, 1995, p. 67). Multiple levels of human experience contribute to those "field of thoughts." For example, individuals' messaging goals may be supplied or influenced by organizational or institutional structures (Barbour et al., 2013; Barbour & Manly, 2016; Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Seo & Creed, 2002). Moreover, because a proliferation of institutional contradictions may spur contradictions in institutional messaging (Lammers, 2011), it is possible that increased organizational or institutional contradictions could be reflected in contradictions in individuals communicators' goals (Barbour et al., 2013). Of course, at the same time, such collectively produced messages reflect the negotiation of a multiplicity of individual contributions.

### **Interaction Architectures**

Individuals and collectives make choices not just about the contents of messages (e.g., the actual language selected to accomplish particular ends) but also about how communication will

take place (Fulk, 1993; Leonardi, 2015; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992).

Individual and collective communicators can make choices about structure, content requirements, timing, or turn-taking (Ballard & McVey, 2014; Barbour & Gill, 2014; Harrison, 2014). These choices range from natural, emergent, and unintentional choices such as deciding to text, rather than call, a delinquent colleague to schedule a confrontation about his behavior, to the structured, formalized, intentional, and built up choices related to the communication of shortcomings in a formalized performance feedback process. Interaction architectures are both individual and collective objects of design that “reveal how important aspects of organizational and professional life are organized around the possibilities for orchestrating interactivity to facilitate some forms of communication while inhibiting other forms of communication” (Aakhus & Laureij, 2012, p. 42).

### **Communicative Moments and Flows**

In particular moments of communication design, individuals produce and evaluate messages to achieve goals in context (O'Keefe, 1988). Message design is inherently interactional because the flow of messages beforehand and the projection of the flow of messages that should likely follow informs the message design in the present (O'Keefe & Lambert, 1995). The creation of a particular message can involve an effort to influence flows of interaction toward particular ends. Communication flows (e.g., Bean & Buikema, 2015; McPhee & Zaug, 2000) are constituted in the moment-to-moment, continuous production and evaluation of messages.

Communication design may be about moments or flows, and organizing may be thought of as emerging in the flows of reciprocal message design. The terms “moments” and “flows” draw attention to a distinction between communication as involving (a) particular messages and particular exchanges in particular communication episodes; and as involving (b) the unfolding of

communication over time and space as well as the fact that moments and flows involve choices about communication and efforts to enact those choices (Ballard & McVey, 2014).

Organizational actors not only produce particular messages, but they may also consider and attempt to manage the flow of messages that constitute organizational life by implementing interaction architectures. In communication design, individuals and collectives (re)produce context in organizing (Aakhus & Laureij, 2012; Barbour et al., 2013). As such, messages and flows may sustain, reflect, and/or reform organizations and institutions (e.g., Barbour et al., 2013; Barbour & Manly, 2016; Lammers, 2011; Lammers & Barbour, 2006).

### **Collective Subjects/Individual Objects**

Collectives also create communication meant to stand for the entity as a whole. For example, in public relations (e.g., Heath & Palenchar, 2009), crisis communication (e.g., Coombs, 2011; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003), and organizational rhetoric (Conrad, 2011), the collective is the message producer (Robichaud & Cooren, 2013; Smith, 1993). The individuals who inhabit roles wherein they speak for the collective “macroactors” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 160) produce, reproduce, and distribute institutional messages (Lammers, 2011). The processes through which those communications are produced are themselves fodder for study. For example, in their study of meetings for the safety oversight of nuclear power plants, Barbour and Gill (2014) found that it was in the safety meetings, in part, that participants were trying “to speak with one voice” (p. 187)—the voice of the regulator—to the owners and operators of nuclear power plants, to other agencies and regulators, and to the public.

The communication produced by organizations reflects internal communication dynamics, yet research on the communication that constitutes external organizational identity (Cheney, Christensen, & Dailey, 2014) has tended to focus on the messages produced by

collectives—their form, argumentation, and affects—without linking these to the internal processes that produce them. Accordingly, for example, in the context of nuclear power, weapons, and waste, Kinsela, Andreas, and Endres (2015) argued for attention to the linkages between external public deliberation processes and internal communication about these deliberations. Even organizations' messages ostensibly meant to have an external audience can nonetheless have effects on and are sent and received by individual organizational members. The foci here can be the communication produced by the collectives and their effects, but also the organizing that produces that communication.

### **Collective Objects**

In such organizing, individuals make choices about how collectives will communicate. For instance, we might decide to start a group chat with our friends rather than communicate with each member individually. Or, as faculty, we set policies for how students in a class are expected to communicate with us. These choices contribute to the constitution of the collective at the same time that they try to direct communication. For instance, Barbour and Gill (2014) found that senior leaders in nuclear safety oversight dictated a particular turn-taking order (making a choice for the group) and particular language to describe problems (e.g., minor versus more than minor). These choices or communicative bids may be followed, contested, or ignored by other communicators, but the point is that, at times, the object of design may be collective, but the subject need not be.

### **AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The distinctions between individual and collective subjects and objects of communication design have important implications for communication research. As the basis for an agenda for future CAD research, the chapter highlights three concerns. First, as a form of normative,

practical theory, CAD theorizing may be advanced by making explicit the functioning of and connections between *goals*, *ideals*, and *logics* in individual and collective communication design. Second, doing so should underscore differences between planning, execution, awareness, ability, sophistication, and effectiveness in communication design. Third, these distinctions have important implications for *communicative interventions and praxis*. Thus, in the following discussion, we address (1) goals, (2) ideals, (3) logics, and (4) praxis, weaving in attention to planning, execution, awareness, ability, sophistication, and effectiveness.

First, as a form of normative, practical theory, future CAD research may address the individual and collective negotiation of efforts to realize preferred forms of communication (Barge & Craig, 2009). Normative theory seeks to “provide a basis for recommendations about how communicators can achieve desirable outcomes” and rather than asking how and why people behave, normative theory asks “(a) how people should behave if they wish to achieve desired outcomes and why, or (b) when people behave in a particular way, how will they be evaluated?” (Goldsmith, 2001, p. 515). That is, communication design orients to goals, embodies varying ideals, and enacts differing logics, and these goals, ideals, and logics may be arrayed in terms of the degree to which they are desired or not, adaptive or not, and effective or not. Attention to the individual and collective objects and subjects of communication design prompts us to ask how those goals, ideals, and logics are negotiated to determine what is desired, adaptive, and effective.

## **Goals**

As noted above, individual message design is guided by goals (O'Keefe, 1988). The theory of message design logics seeks to address the problem of *instantiation*, or the link between message form and function, where message form refers to “the substance, organization,



and placement of discourse” (O’Keefe & Lambert, 1995, p. 54), and “message function involves both the antecedent conditions of message generation (especially the goals of the message producer) and the intended and unintended effects of the message” (p. 54). Individuals produce particular communication to accomplish particular aims, but a given communicative act may perform multiple functions, and the same goal may be served by different utterances (Wilson & Feng, 2007). Hence, the fuzziness of language itself makes possible the artful exploitation of organizational and institutional structures such as tensions and contradictions and the reach and strength of individual and institutional messages (Barbour & Manly, 2016; Barley, 2011; Bisel, Kramer, & Banas, in press; Putnam et al., 2016; Seo & Creed, 2002).

A particular communicative situation constituted in part by competing organizational and institutional structures may imply contradictory goals that communicators must somehow address in their communication design (Barbour & Gill, 2014; Barbour et al., 2013). The goals that guide message production and evaluation need not be “clear, consciously recognized objectives” but instead they can be “socially codified representations of situations” (O’Keefe, 1988, p. 82). Context—which includes organizational and institutional structures—makes goals more or less salient in a particular communication situation.

Put another way, goals are not only multiple (Bingham & Burleson, 1989; Clark & Delia, 1979; Wilson, 2002), they are multilevel. They have cognitive, organizational, and institutional form and may be interrelated. For example, to explain the activation of particular goals in particular situations, O’Keefe and Lambert (1995) relied on a parallel distributed processing architecture to conceptualize cognition: “The mind consists of a highly interconnected network of simple computing elements functioning in parallel” (p. 68), where an “item in memory...is represented by a pattern of activation over many units, where each unit represents the degree of

presence or absence of a specific thought” (p. 69). At the level of individual cognition, goals are “situated and distributed in patterns of thought,” (p. 78), they activate message elements to varying degrees, and effects involve “processes of reflection and evaluation” (p. 78). Cognition orients to goals derived in part from the communicative situation, which includes organizational and institutional context. Goals are socially constructed, and individuals must and do still find ways of acting through communication when goals are contradictory, irrational, or tensional (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Putnam et al., 2016; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). Goals implied by differing institutional and organizational structures have different force or encumbrance in conversation (Lammers, 2011; Lammers & Barbour, 2006).

## **Ideals**

Whereas goals focus on the desired outcomes, communication design also orients to situated ideals (Aakhus, 2001; Barbour & Gill, 2014). Craig and Tracy (2014) defined situated ideals as “the beliefs, usually somewhat inchoate and often contested, that participants hold about how they ought to act within a practice” (p. 232). If goals are desired ends, then ideals are beliefs about *what ought to be*. As a communicator, one’s goal may be to realize a particular ideal or to flout it; these concepts are separate. Craig and Tracy also drew a distinction between situated ideals and the ideals “officially espoused by institutions and participants,” meaning that situated ideals may or may not jibe with the formal ideals for practice, which can be institutional as well as individual. Instead, the analyst must reconstruct situated ideals by “examining the criticisms that participants make of each other’s in-context actions and through juxtaposing various espousals of an institution’s and an activity’s purposes gained through interviews or study of institutional documents” (p. 232).

Organizational communication may also be usefully understood as involving multiple competing ideals for action that are in tension and that organizational members must negotiate (Gibbs, 2009; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Real & Putnam, 2005; Tracy, 2004). These competing ideals are likewise available in the field of knowledge (O'Keefe & Lambert, 1995), navigated by communicators in their production and evaluation of messages. The multiple, contradictory, and tensional aspects of organizational and institutional forces make particular communicative goals and ideals more or less salient; offer alternative criteria for the evaluation of messages as legitimate; and have different power in communication.

For example, institutional messages—established, widespread, legitimized discursive resources—are distinguished in part by their influence in ongoing message creation and evaluation (Lammers, 2011). Institutional structures operate in messages and flows (Lammers & Barbour, 2006), because they imply shifting and contradictory goals and ideals for action, give meaning(s) to context, and offer discursive resources for the construction of messages and interaction architectures. The distinctive contribution of an organizational communication perspective is the promise of explaining the influence of macromorphic forces such as institutions as well as organizational structures in and through communication.

## **Logics**

Inasmuch as goals are desired outcomes and ideals are fodder, focus, and standards for those desires, logics are *conceptualizations of means-to-desired-ends relationships*. Logics embody beliefs about how communication, organizations, and institutions work. A communication design logic is a clustering of beliefs about how communication works or should work. We employ communication design logics as we make choices about how to communicate, and they reflect more or less sophisticated models of communication (O'Keefe, 1988). In

O’Keefe and Lambert’s (1995) model of cognition, activation depends on the speaker’s “activity model,” their sense of how an activity works and what it should entail based on their past experience. The activity model “maps messages onto expected effects” (p. 77), and therefore evolves as communicators develop and refine these maps. In this sense, individuals’ communication design logics are developmental, where the model of individual actors’ communication sophistication can permeate organizing, and by extension, institutions. The operation of communication design logics in messages and flows thus can explain why institutional messages are effective or not, legitimate or not, why such messages endure, reach, and encumber (Lammers, 2011), and why messages institutionalize or not (Hardy, 2011). Institutional logics prescribe legitimate message contents (institutional messages) and the legitimate structures within which messages and flows may be formed and spread (Lammers, 2011).

Organizational and institutional structures enable and constrain communication design by offering rules and resources for communicating (a similar principle is fundamental to multiple domains of communication scholarship, e.g., DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Weick, 1995). These may include, in other words, interpretations of the array and meaning of goals, ideals for evaluating success, and differing conceptions of how those goals should be accomplished, those ideals fulfilled. Context operates in part through the social construction of goals, ideals, and logics. Collectives are sites of the negotiation among multiple, interdependent communication designers/actors/evaluators. Studying communication design should raise questions about how goals, ideals, and logics are negotiated in and through communication and to what ends. Doing so will have important implications for intervention through communication design and communicative praxis.

## **Praxis**

Praxis refers here to holistic patterns of communicative action through which actors navigate organizational and institutional demands and contradictions (Benson, 1977; DeGooyer, 2010; Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2003). Praxis involves the full measure of activity that individual and collective actors mobilize to negotiate the tensional character of organizational life (Baxter, 2011). Praxis may be more or less sophisticated and skillful. For instance, DeGooyer argued that “supple praxis is effective in solving problems because it disruptively moves beyond a given problem’s system of rules, beyond its incommensurability to the next, yet unknown, incommensurability” (p. 300). Moreover, Seo and Creed (2002) theorized praxis as the mediator of institutional change. They defined praxis as “a particular type of collective human action, situated in a given sociohistorical context but driven by the inevitable by-products of that context—social contradictions” (p. 230). They argued that efforts to accomplish institutional change depend on the success of the mobilization of institutional contradictions in praxis.

That is, it is in the negotiation of communicative tensions that praxis holds the potential to enact change. Barbour and Manly (2016), for instance, found that volunteer responders were able to reconstruct the logics governing their work as they negotiated tensions and contradictions between the logics of the professional and preparedness. They argued that the “generative praxis” they observed (p. 337) held promise for addressing persistent and intractable problems of disaster preparedness. Putnam et al. (2016), furthermore, argued that praxis, “focuses on an actor’s awareness or consciousness of contradictions and paradoxes,” a consciousness that “emanates in felt experiences, self-monitoring of behavioral patterns, recognition of clashes in actions, and understanding the nature of tensions” (p. 18). Praxis “entails being reflexive about actions and interactions; analyzing and penetrating tension-producing structures and experiences;

and making choices to call into question, respond, and move forward amid contradictions and tensions” (p. 18).

Praxis depends on the ability to reflect on and make disciplined choices about communication, and then execute those choices in practice. Individuals are not always aware of all goals, ideals, and logics as we communicate, and not all of them are salient all the time. Individuals, although not often aware of their communication as such (Kellermann, 1992), nonetheless make choices about communication to achieve goals within contexts informed by a sense of how communication works (O’Keefe, 1988). The most sophisticated communicators may be those who are not only are reflexive about the tensions between goals, ideals, and logics, but also understand communication as a space in which actors can negotiate and redefine those tensions. Different forms of praxis imply different ideas about how communication works or should work (Baxter, 2011; Putnam et al., 2016), but even sophisticated designs may fail in practice. For example, Barbour and Gill (2014) found that competing goals, ideals, and logics for communication design in safety meetings circulated in inspectors’ decisions about how to communicate. However, in attempting to actually adopt an approach to communication, individuals, teams, and the unit as a whole varied in the efficacy with which they could do so.

Research focused on the tensional character of organizing typically construes sophistication and success in terms of the effectiveness with which actors are able to negotiate tensions and contradictions (Baxter, 2011; Putnam et al., 2016). Thus, Lewis, Isbell, and Koschmann (2010) argued that managing tensions between contradictory goals is of essential importance to effective interorganizational collaboration. Furthermore, Barge et al. (2008) highlighted commonplacing, bounded mutuality, and reflexive positioning as useful skills in that they helped situated actors cope with tensions in the management of change. Thus, in as much as

communication design can empower intervention in and through communication processes (Harrison, 2014), future research needs to explore how choices about communication reflect more or less sophisticated assumptions about how communication and organizing works, and how these assumptions *and* actors' skill and ability in acting on them likely have different effects and possess different efficacy in sensemaking and problem solving (e.g., Aakhus & Bzdak, 2015; Ganesh & Stohl, 2013; Johansson & Stohl, 2012). For example, institutional messages may be more or less legitimate, encumber more or less, and have more or less reach, in part due to the skill with which actors put message elements to work, including the "collations of thoughts" that are institutional messages (Lammers, 2011, p. 154). In sum, CAD research needs to draw a distinction between the choices made about communication and the factors that influence the individual and collective realization of those choices.

Table 2

*Questions for Future Research*

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1. How are goals, ideals, and logics negotiated in individual and collective communication design?
  2. (a) What are the relationships between individual and collective communication design?  
(b) How do collective communication design processes influence individual communication design? (c) How do individual communication design processes constitute collective communication design?
  3. How are communication sophistication, communication skill, and communication ability related?
  4. How do communication sophistication, communication skill, and communication ability contribute, discretely and in concert, to communicative praxis?
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5. What explains the collective adoption, persistence, and effectiveness of particular designs for communication?
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## **CONCLUSION**

The concept of design, like communication, invites a kind of broadening of scope that threatens to dilute its own theoretical and practical usefulness. It is incumbent on communication research and theory in this domain to retain the distinction between a focus on communication itself versus the communicative processes that produced the communication. These phenomena are of course related and intertwined, but they are also distinctive. Communication research and theory are useful in part because of the many insights they hold about particular sorts of messages, architectures, moments, and flows. CAD brings attention to the at times straightforward and at times complex negotiation of choices about these communicative forms—choices that may be made by individuals or collectives or a combination over time. Understanding those choices and the processes that lead to them can be useful for understanding and intervening in and through communication.



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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Communicative Moments and Flows:** Differing scopes of analytical focus. A concern for moments brings attention to particular communication episodes in comparatively short time periods, and a concern for flows brings attention to the accretion of the creation, exchange, and interpretation of messages over multiple episodes for comparatively longer spans of time.

**Goals:** Aims sought by communicators. Communicators produce messages and make choices about interaction to try to achieve goals. Can be multiple, multilevel, and contradictory.

**Ideals for Communication:** Notions of what makes communication effective, reflected in communication logics. Beliefs regarding how communication ought to be.

**Interaction Architectures:** Communication forms, formats, and scripts that specify features such as turn-taking, messaging contents, and length. These are conceived and used by communicators to influence the flow of communication.

**Logics, Communicative:** Communicators' models of how particular communication achieves particular goals.

**Messages:** Can refer to specific content (i.e., the utterances, symbols) produced by communicators, the intended actions (i.e., asking another for help) undertaken by communicators, inferences about the meaning of content that may differ among communicators, and realized effects (i.e., shared understanding of a request for help, willingness to offer help).

**Praxis:** Holistic patterns of communicative action through which actors navigate relational, organizational, institutional and tensions, competing demands, and contradictions. Scholars have used the terms praxis generically to describe adaptive and maladaptive patterns of behavior, and others use the term to focus on action that successfully negotiates tensions and contradictions.