

How We Talk About How We Talk: Communication Theory in the Public Interest

by Robert T. Craig

This article is a revision of the author's presidential address to the 54th annual conference of the International Communication Association, presented May 29, 2004, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Using recent public discourse on talk and drugs as an example, it reflects on our culture's preoccupation with communication and the pervasiveness of metadiscourse (talk about talk for practical purposes) in private, public, and academic discourses. It argues that communication theory can be used to describe and analyze the common vocabularies of public metadiscourse, critique assumptions about communication embedded in those vocabularies, and contribute useful new ways of talking about talk in the public interest.

"Talk to your kids."

"Talk to your kids about drugs."

"Talk to your doctor."

"Talk to your doctor about Ambien."

"Ask your doctor if Lipitor is right for you."

"Ask your doctor if Advair is right for you."

"Talk. Know. Ask."

"Questions: The antidrug."

This collage of quotations selected from recent drug company commercials and antidrug public service announcements highlights a well-known irony in the public discourse on drugs that is not, however, my main point.

Yes, the culture that produced these ads is rather obsessed with drugs. That culture is also rather obsessed with talk or, more generally, with communication. Both obsessions are on display in these ads in interesting juxtaposition.

Drugs, in this cultural logic, are powerful and therefore as dangerous as they are desirable. They solve problems and they cause problems. We take drugs to

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help us feel better but they can have harmful side effects and are subject to abuse. Potent drugs should be used only under the expert authority of medical doctors. Drug abuse can have serious medical, social, and legal consequences. Those in authority, especially the parents of children at risk for drug abuse, have an obligation to prevent it.

Talk is recommended to prevent drug problems, even as drugs are increasingly recommended to address communication problems arising from social anxiety, hyperactivity, depression, and other maladies. Talk in this culture is the appropriate way to get legal drugs when you think you need them—that is, by talking to your doctor—and talk is also the way to prevent illegal teenage drug abuse—by talking to your kids. Talk is assumed to be a potent remedy. To serve effectively, either as the “antidrug” or as a way to get drugs, its potency must be at least comparable, in a sense, to that of drugs themselves as a force influencing human behavior.

The importance of talk and communication generally is, in fact, a commonplace assumption of this culture. As the sociolinguist Deborah Cameron (2000) has observed:

we live in what might be called a “communication culture” ... a culture that is particularly self-conscious and reflexive about communication, and that generates large quantities of metadiscourse about it. For the members of such a culture it is axiomatically “good to talk”—but at the same time it is natural to make judgments about which kinds of talk are good and which are less good. People aspire, or think they ought to aspire, to communicate “better”; and they are highly receptive to expert advice. (p. viii)

Our present cultural emphasis on talk and communication is not a simple fact of nature. The sheer phenomenon of communication is, of course, natural and universal in the sense that all biological species of a certain complexity do it in some way, and every human culture has ways of doing it. Communication is undoubtedly an important fact of nature that can be studied empirically. However, the idea that communication is important, the idea that human problems are caused by bad communication and can be solved by better communication, the idea that communication is a technical skill that can be improved by applying principles and techniques disseminated by communication experts, the idea, in short, that it is “good to talk”—these ideas are elements of a cultural pattern that has evolved in particular historical circumstances in close association with specific social practices and related cultural themes of human progress, modernization, and globalization.¹

Metadiscourse is a technical term for what we do when we reflexively talk about talk for some pragmatic purpose (Verschuere, 1999). Metadiscourse comprises a large array of communicative practices that perform a variety of functions in everyday interaction. To mention just one example, the phrase “that’s a promise” can be a bit of metadiscourse used to emphasize one’s sincere commitment to

¹ For varying views on the sociohistorical context in which communication theory has developed, see Cameron (2000), Deetz (1994), Mattelart (1996, 2000), Peters (1999), and Schiller (1996).

a course of action. Although metadiscourse per se is probably universal, communication culture in Cameron's (2000) sense of the term is characterized by a markedly large amount of explicit talk about talk in public as well as private discourse, along with a range of metadiscursive devices specific to the cultural patterns she describes. An example not discussed by Cameron that nevertheless clearly reflects the influence of communication culture would be the phrase, "We should talk." In a particular context, this metadiscursive device can be used to frame an impending conversation as an especially important kind of communication event that somewhat resembles the American cultural pattern Katriel and Philipsen (1981) described as "the communication ritual." It signals that the participants in that conversation are faced with a mutual problem that can be solved only by a serious kind of "sit down and talk" that has the required features of "good communication."

Talk about talk is indeed ubiquitous in public as well as private discourse. Advertisements exhorting us to talk to our kids about drugs or talk to our doctor about drugs exemplify this phenomenon, but examples easily can be found in any day's media offerings. Newspaper headlines such as the following are perfectly commonplace:

- "Shrill Rhetoric Undermines Discourse"
- "Health Messages Not Getting Through"
- "9/11 Panel to Focus on Communications"
- "Male 'Code of Conduct' Isolates Men"
- "Cell Phone Invaders"

Notably, not only does each headline allude to some kind of communication, each also suggests or implies that the communication alluded to is somehow problematic. The themes of talk and communication are often associated in public discourse with conflict and failure, problems of communication, judgments about the quality or success of communication, and urgent pleas for better communication.

Our cultural preoccupation with communication, with its emphasis on problems, breakdowns, and remedies, is no less prominent in the more refined discourses of social science, scholarship, and intellectual thought than it is in everyday public and private talk. Indeed, this cultural preoccupation with communication may largely explain the emergence of communication studies as a new academic discipline, the idea of which always somehow makes sense to people and seems important (if perhaps a bit suspiciously trendy), even though they may not be able to imagine in any detail what the field actually consists of.

Former ICA President Stanley Deetz attributed the rise of our discipline to social changes that increasingly require people to negotiate over aspects of social life that were formerly taken for granted or naturalized. He saw communication as offering a fundamentally new mode of explanation that has risen to prominence because existing modes of explanation, such as those traditionally associated with psychology and sociology, "fail to provide compelling guidance for responses to a central set of new social issues" (1994, p. 568). Deetz's (1997) ICA presidential address was entitled "Communication in the Age of Negotiation."

John Durham Peters (1999), in a fine, provocative book entitled *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, evoked a somewhat different sense of the importance of communication while describing it as “one of the characteristic concepts of the twentieth century” (p. 1). In prose that deserves to be quoted at some length, Peters continued:

“Communication” is a registry of modern longings. The term evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited. Desire being most intense when the object is absent, longings for communication also index a deep sense of dereliction in social relationships. . . . “Communication” is a rich tangle of intellectual and cultural strands that encodes our time’s confrontations with itself. To understand communication is to understand much more. An apparent answer to the painful divisions between self and other, private and public, and inner thought and outer word, the notion . . . is a sink into which most of our hopes and fears seem to be poured. (p. 2)

Longings for communication as a way to overcome painful human divisions (Peters, 1999), rising demands for democratic participation and negotiation (Deetz, 1994), a growing consensus that better communication skills are the key to personal empowerment and success in every field of social life (Cameron, 2000)—each of these themes seems to capture some part of the cultural background that gives our academic discipline its larger meaning. The prominence of metadiscourse in private, public, and academic discourse is thus a striking phenomenon of modern society that gives cultural currency to our discipline, helps to sustain our institutional position, and, I believe, also invites us to play a public role. Public interest in our discipline is rooted in popular beliefs that communication is important, faulty communication is to blame for many human problems, and better communication can make a better world. As experts in communication, we are expected to help solve those problems and bring about that better world by promoting better communication.

Our work as communication scholars can, and at least sometimes does, I believe, promote better communication. Yet, although communication research undoubtedly has a wide range of practical applications, the idea that our discipline can make a better world by promoting better communication may seem excessively idealistic, perhaps even grandiose. Nevertheless, if this is the deeper cultural meaning of our discipline and the role that society somehow expects us to play, it offers us a great opportunity to participate, critically and constructively, in the formation of public culture.

The concept of metadiscourse suggests an interesting way of thinking about the public role of our discipline. How communication is talked about in public—the quality of public metadiscourse—depends to a large extent on the availability of a common metacommunicative vocabulary in which communication problems and practical remedies can be intelligibly formulated. What I wish to suggest, although I can only do so in very general terms in this short presidential address, is that one way for communication theory to play a

public role is for us to apply it to the critical analysis and reform of public talk about talk, using communication theory to describe and analyze the common vocabularies of public metadiscourse, critique assumptions about communication embedded in that public metadiscourse, and contribute useful new ways of talking about talk in the public interest.

For purposes of this argument, I am using the term *communication theory* very broadly to include any systematic, critically reflexive, and relatively abstract discourse about communication. Communication theory in this broad sense constitutes what I have called a *theoretical metadiscourse*, a diverse set of conceptually sophisticated ways of talking about talk (or communicating about communication) that derive from several different intellectual traditions (Craig, 1999). This field of discourse includes ideas that at least some communication scientists would recognize as theories in the narrower sense of formal explanatory constructs—such as uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) or spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1991)—along with other ideas, such as functionalism, critical theory, and feminism, that communication scientists might prefer to describe with terms like paradigm, theoretical approach, metatheory, philosophy, criticism, cultural interpretation, or ideology. Without denying that these distinctions can be important for some purposes, my broad use of the term communication theory emphasizes that all of these different kinds of ideas share the essential characteristics of theoretical metadiscourse. They are all conceptually sophisticated ways of talking about talk that can potentially be used to describe, critique, and offer useful alternatives to the forms of metadiscourse that currently occupy the public sphere.

Returning briefly to the examples with which I began, the ads exhorting us to talk to our kids and doctors about drugs, I note first that all of them rely implicitly on the commonplace assumption that it is “good to talk.” If we look behind these apparently simplistic slogans to examine closely the more elaborated discourse that surrounds the ads, for example, in supplementary materials that are published on drug company and antidrug abuse websites, we find, among other things, a great deal of specific expert advice, sometimes highly detailed and elaborately explained, telling us how exactly to talk to our kids about drugs and even how to talk to our doctor about drugs.

For example, the KidsHealth website includes a lengthy section on “Talking to your child about drugs” (KidHealth.org, 2001) with a subsection on “Why do I need to talk to my kids about drugs?” and one on “What should I say to my kid?” that gives detailed suggestions for different age groups.

Drug company websites often include lists of specific questions to ask your doctor, along with more general advice on how to talk with doctors. For example, the website for ALTACE (a blood pressure medication) has a page on “Talking to your doctor about your cardiovascular risk” that includes, under the heading “What your doctor needs to know,” information supporting the clinical effectiveness of ALTACE and suggests that “you and your doctor . . . can discuss whether ALTACE can provide additional risk reduction” (Monarch Pharmaceuticals, 2004). In these drug company texts, notions of good communi-

cation and patient empowerment are used to enlist patients in the service of marketing the drugs to physicians.²

Of many aspects of these texts that could be commented on from various standpoints within communication theory, I will mention just two that come from rather opposite points of view and in conjunction raise a larger issue—one that indeed promises to open up an entirely new field of communication research—that I will introduce very briefly by way of conclusion.

Drug ads and antidrug ads with their associated texts both typically assume that communication can be an effective way of getting results if certain techniques are used and that audience members who are informed about those techniques are capable of using them to modify their own communication behavior. Proponents of a theory called *communibiology* would question at least the second assumption (Beatty, McCroskey, & Valencic, 2001). According to *communibiology*, many important aspects of individual communication behavior are genetically based and therefore quite difficult to change. Contrary to what is typically assumed in the ads, *communibiologists* argue that we should not talk about talk in ways that imply that communication techniques can be easily learned and applied by anyone. They would suggest instead that we talk about talk in ways that emphasize the difficulty of changing behavior. At a minimum, it would be important for expert advice givers to warn their audiences that certain personality types are likely to find the advice especially difficult to follow.³

Proponents of a cultural theory of communication, on the other hand, would note the absence in the ads of any reference to culture differences. The ads and associated texts seem to imply that the recommended techniques of “good communication” are equally suitable to everyone regardless of cultural background. From an ethnographic point of view, however, as Cameron (2000) has argued,

the phrase “communication skills” names a cultural construct, not a natural phenomenon with an objective existence in the world. Whether some person, or group of people, has good, bad, or indifferent communication skills is entirely dependent on what “communication” is taken to be, and what is thought to constitute “skill” in it. (p. 145)

² Although patient advocates (e.g., Elfstrom, 2000) often stress the need for assertiveness and strategic behavior to influence doctors, official drug company websites that I have reviewed always portray a fully cooperative doctor–patient relationship, support the authority of physicians without qualification, and never advise patients to challenge or argue with their doctors. However, even getting patients to ask their doctors about a branded drug that has been widely advertised in the media is potentially a none-too-subtle way of persuading doctors to prescribe the drug or forcing them to explain why not. Although specific effects on the doctor–patient relationship have not yet been demonstrated empirically, it would appear that viewers of these ads are being “trained” to engage in appropriate, credible, and persuasive interaction with health care professionals” (Cline & Young, 2004, p. 134).

³ The *communibiological* view implies that drugs, either existing or yet to be developed, may be useful for overcoming biologically based communication skill deficits. One imagines that patients needing those drugs would face the problem of talking to their doctors to get them—a sort of “catch-22,” it would seem.

A cultural theory of communication promotes ways of talking about talk that emphasize the ritual qualities of communication (Rothenbuhler, 1998) and the rich cultural variability among the speech codes that govern the creation of meanings in interaction (Philipsen, 1992). At a minimum, it would be important for expert advice givers to acknowledge that their advice needs to be applied in ways that take account of diverse cultural styles of communication.⁴

It should be noted that these two critiques rely on rather opposite assumptions about biology and communication. One critique assumes that communication behavior is biologically determined, whereas the other assumes that communication behavior is shaped by culture. The two assumptions are not, of course, strictly contradictory. Communication behavior may well be influenced by some combination of biology and culture (Condit, 2000; Sherry, 2004), and, in any case, the two theories refer to somewhat different phenomena (communibiology, to specific behavioral tendencies like shyness; ethnography, to cultural variability in codes for interpreting and evaluating communication). However, the two theories clearly are trying to push the discussion about communication skills in opposite directions.

Taken together, the two contrasting critiques resonate with a larger set of societal controversies about the relationship between biology and communication that bears significantly on how we talk about talk in both theoretical and practical metadiscourse. Although the drug and antidrug ads may imply that talk and drugs are equivalently powerful forces influencing human behavior, with the growing importance of drugs, and more generally the emergence of what might be called biotechnological approaches to human problems, biology has become a serious alternative to communication, challenging cultural logics that valorize talk and communication as the preferred way of solving human problems. From this point of view, talk and drugs, although they often work well together, nevertheless tap into sometimes competing cultural logics in contemporary public metadiscourse. Talk and drugs are increasingly talked about as competitors. For example, talk-based forms of psychotherapy have been losing ground to psychotropic drugs. The proliferation of prescription drugs for treating psychological problems threatens the future of psychotherapy as a profession (Miller & Hubble, 2004).

What seems true of biology and communication seems equally true of several other cultural logics that frequently compete against communication as ways of framing issues in public discourse. Just as psychotropic drugs compete against the talking cure, so do these logics:

- *Free-market mechanisms* that are supposed to operate automatically, in the manner of Adam Smith's "invisible hand," compete against solutions that involve collective deliberation and culture formation—for example, in debates about economic incentives versus communitarian or educational approaches to problems of poverty and social welfare;
- *Traditionalism and moral absolutism* compete against solutions based on dialogue and social constructionism—for example, in debates about such seemingly intractable moral issues as gay marriage and abortion;

⁴ Cline & Young (2004) concluded that the drug ads they studied tended to promote social stereotypes.

- *War, terrorism, and other violent and coercive practices* compete against negotiation, persuasion, mutual surveillance, and other communication-based alternatives to the use of force—for example, in the debate concerning the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

As these examples illustrate, despite the broad consensus in our communication-oriented culture that it is “good to talk,” differences over the relative emphasis to be placed on certain notions of communication versus other, contrasting ways of framing human problems are significantly operative, if sometimes only as a subtext, in much of our current public discourse. Although we may now be living in “the Age of Negotiation” (Deetz, 1997), communication still apparently competes with other modes of addressing problems, and the issues that divide these alternative modes are worthy of careful empirical study, theoretical analysis, normative critique, and efforts to reform. A task for communication theory thus becomes to illuminate and inform public metadiscourse—how we talk about how we talk—in the public interest.

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