Chapter 6
Exploring the Intersections of Individual and Collective Communication Design:
A Research Agenda

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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 and ability in enacting 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.

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 involves 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

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