

# The Self-Regulatory Focus as a Determinant of Perceived Richness of a Communication Medium

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## ABSTRACT

*At present, a large number of theories exist which explain the process for choosing communication media in organizations. Channel expansion theory combines a large part of the theoretical foundation for these theories, suggesting that the perceived richness of a communication medium varies according to experience based on the knowledge of the organization's members. Equally, Regulatory Focus Theory also suggests that individuals behave in a different way when their self regulation states are different. This investigation intends to present a set of proposals based on the existing literature about how strategy type /focus (promotion and prevention) affects the perception of the richness of a communication medium, increasing the explanatory capacity of channel expansion theory.*

**Keywords:** *Channel Expansion, Communication Medium, Media Richness, Organizational Communication, Self-Regulatory Focus*

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## INTRODUCTION

The scientific research field on organizational communication reflects its importance in good organizational practices, as well as in the attainment of individual and organizational objectives both in the short and long term (Yukl, 1989). Within this field of investigation, the study of communication media in organizations has

formed its own area of work in which a large number of theories have proliferated, investigations and publications focused mainly on the reasons why managers and workers in an organization use certain communication media to the detriment of others, as well as the efficiency of these choices.

The main theories that explain the choice process for a communication medium in organizations stem from literature in the psychological area and can be represented on a continuum, placing those theories based on a rational per-

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spective at one end and theories that emphasize social aspects at the other. The main and most relevant theories on the choice of communication media in organizations are media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986), (Treviño, Lengel, & Daft, 1987), Social Influence Theory (Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990; Schmitz & Fulk, 1991), Critical Mass Theory (Oliver, Marwell, & Teixeira, 1985; Markus, 1990b), Social Presence Theory (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), and Channel Expansion Theory (Carlson & Zmud, 1999).

This last of these, Channel Expansion Theory, has focused a large number of investigations in recent years (for example: Timmerman & Madhavapeddi, 2008; D'Urso & Rains, 2008) relating the proposals of theories focused on rational decision making to those of social influence in the organizations. More specifically, Carlson and Zmud (1999) suggest that decisions on the choice of communication media are taken with the perceived richness of the media in mind, which depends partly on experiences based on knowledge. On the other hand, Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997) also suggests that individuals behave differently when their self regulation states are different (with a focus on promotion and prevention). Individuals with a high promotion focus show an attitude aimed at maximizing benefits and therefore with a tendency to advance. On the contrary, individuals with a high prevention focus usually show a monitoring state aimed at maximizing safety and therefore with a tendency to avoid losses.

The objective of this investigation is to suggest a set of proposals from the existing literature on how the type of strategy/focus (promotion and prevention) affects the perception of richness of a communication media. More specifically, the intention is to propose relations between the four experiences based on knowledge of Channel Expansion Theory and Social Influence with the focuses of Regulatory Focus Theory.

## **Is it Still Necessary to Investigate the Choice of Communication Media in Organizations?**

Presently, communication technologies play a fundamental role as communication media between members in an organization. Some communication media such as electronic mail and videoconferencing have arrived to a mature stage becoming relatively common elements and “omnipresent in contemporary organizations” (Minsky & Marin, 1999). For this reason, it is practically impossible to consider an organization without communication by means of computer-based technologies (Curls & Gattiker, 2001). Some could argue that this maturity makes the study on the choice of communication through this type of technology as obsolete. However, on the other hand, it is possible to argue that the fact that these technologies and media are now so generalized makes this type of study still more relevant (van den Hooff, Groot, & de Jonge, 2005). Since communication media are an integral part of organizational communication, explaining how they are used and their effects on organizational efficiency give sufficient reasons to support investigation.

## **Roots on Theories on Communication Media Choice**

Most investigations on organizational communication are based on the theoretical foundations of communication developed in the fields of psychology and sociology. Nevertheless, some authors claim that organizational communication has evolved and matured into an independent discipline to those of social psychology, sociology, administration or anthropology, as demonstrated by its solid trajectory in empirical and practical investigation. The foundations of these areas have served to develop mid-range theoretical proposals such as Functional Theory (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1983, 1986, 1996), Structuration Theory (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996, 1986; Poole & Doelger,

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