

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
COMMUNICATION  
THEORY

1

Stephen W. Littlejohn ◦ Karen A. Foss

*University of New Mexico*

EDITORS



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC

---

A SAGE Reference Publication

change agency having, or having had, an E-E project. Diverse opinions now characterize the E-E field, including the voices of enthusiasts, dissenters, and skeptics. More organizations are engaged in the practice of E-E, and now teaching and scholarship on E-E are finding their way into university-based schools of communication, public health, and international development. Evaluations of E-E interventions, over the years, have become increasingly sophisticated, employing multiple theoretical perspectives and research methods. In the past decade or so, the E-E strategy emerged as an important issue in the fields of communication, health, and development practice and research.

The field of E-E will move into various expressive forms such as arts, crafts, textiles, murals, and other forms well beyond mass-mediated communication. In South Africa, for example, *positive pottery* includes colorful AIDS ribbons, made by individuals with HIV, etched with various African images. E-E is expected in the future to integrate “modern” and “traditional” entertainment outlets, along with “big” and “little” media technologies, an eventuality made possible by advances in the Internet. Web-based delivery makes it possible to tailor a communication message to audience members. Further, such interventions will probably become more closely in touch with participatory methods, as the work of Brazilian theater director Augusto Boal illustrates. Boal, who founded the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) movement, based his work on Paulo Freire’s principles of dialogue and interaction. Here active spectators (“spect-actors”) address and reflect on problems and take control of situations so that they are not put in the role of passive receiver or victim.

E-E is already starting to go beyond traditional communication forms in areas such as family planning and HIV prevention to address other pressing social issues, including, for example, peace, conflict mediation, terrorism, and race relations. The role of E-E will be recognized as a factor in understanding how people work toward liberation and empowerment through using traditional songs and performances to protest, resist, invite dialogue, engage in debate, and cope with the circumstances in which they live.

*Arvind Singhal*

See also Elaboration Likelihood Theory; Media and Mass Communication Theories

#### Further Readings

- Papa, M. J., Singhal, A., Law, S., Sood, S., Rogers, E. M., & Shefner, C. L. (2000). Entertainment-education and social change: An analysis of parasocial interaction, social learning, collective efficacy, and paradoxical communication. *Journal of Communication, 50*, 31–55.
- Singhal, A., Cody, M. J., Rogers, E. M., & Sabido, M. (2004). *Entertainment-education and social change: History, research, practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Singhal, A., & Rogers, E. M. (1999). *Entertainment-education: A communication strategy for social change*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Singhal, A., & Rogers, E. M. (2002). A theoretical agenda for entertainment-education. *Communication Theory, 12*, 117–135.

---

## ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION THEORIES

---

Environmental communication is a field within the communication discipline, as well as a meta-field that cuts across disciplines. Research and theory within the field are united by the topical focus on communication and human relations with the environment. Scholars who study environmental communication are particularly concerned with the ways people communicate about the natural world because they believe that such communication has far-reaching effects at a time of largely human-caused environmental crises. This entry outlines some ways researchers who study environmental communication use existing theory to investigate their particular questions about *human-nature relations*. The entry also illustrates ways scholars have developed and are currently developing theory that is specific to environmental communication. The final section of this entry explores the ways some environmental communication scholars see their goals of applying and creating theory not only as trying to understand and explain but also as striving to improve human relations with nature.

Central to environmental communication theory are these assumptions: The ways we communicate powerfully affect our perceptions of the living world; in turn, these perceptions help shape how we define our relations with and within nature and how we act toward nature. Thus, environmental communication scholars often speak of communication as not only reflecting but also constructing, producing, and naturalizing particular human relations with the environment.

Many environmental communication theories include the assumption that human representations of nature, be they verbal or nonverbal, public or interpersonal, face-to-face or mediated communication, are *interested*. This, in part, means that communication about nature is informed by social, economic, and political contexts and interests. These contexts and interests help to shape our communication, often in ways we are unaware of, and direct us to see nature through particular lenses while also obscuring other views of nature.

The theories that scholars use to investigate these assumptions range widely in their epistemological and methodological orientations. Because human relations with nature are negotiated within cultural communication, mass media, public communication, interpersonal communication, popular culture, and so forth, environmental communication theory draws from cultural theory, media theory, rhetorical theory, social movement theory, pop-culture theory, and many other areas. In this way, environmental communication researchers have accessed existing theories to serve as conceptual frameworks for their questions and studies.

For example, in media studies of environmental communication, researchers have at times used framing theory to analyze media coverage of the environment, finding, for example, that the mainstream media increasingly frame environmental activist *ecotage* (eco-sabotage) as ecoterrorism. In examining cultural manifestations of human-nature relations in face-to-face communication, some researchers have used ethnographic approaches, finding, for example, that members of a particular non-Western culture speak of "listening" to nature, a cultural form of communication that supports a highly reflective and revelatory mode of communication that opens one to the relationships between natural and human forms.

Environmental communication scholars also borrow from and add to transdisciplinary theory that is both environment specific, such as ecofeminist theory and political ecology, and non-environment-specific, such as social constructionist theory, systems theory, and performance theory. In addition, scholars have created theories that emanate specifically from environmental communication issues. These borrowed and generated theories are applied to a variety of sites of human-nature relations. For instance, some theories focus on explaining public dialogue about the environment, including political, media, and advocate discourses, while some focus on explaining cultural views or everyday communication about the environment. Other, more general theories span these and other sites of communication because they deal with fundamental ways humans communicate about nature.

### Origins of Environmental Communication

Environmental communication is thought to have emerged as a distinct field in the United States in the early 1980s from the tradition of rhetorical theory. In historical accounts of the young discipline, scholars often cite the 1984 publication of a generative rhetorical study as definitively announcing the field to the rest of the communication discipline. In this study, Christine Oravec analyzed the discourse of early-1900s preservationists and conservationists, two sides of a controversy over whether to build a dam in a highly regarded natural site. Oravec illustrated how conservationists won—and the dam was built—by appealing to a "progressive" view of the "public" and its relationship to nature. The debate signaled the defeat of one view of society—the preservationist view that the intact beauty of nature served the nation as an organic whole—and the rise of the conservationist view of progressivism, in which the material needs of individuals determine the uses of nature, a view which is still a dominant discursive force in the ways environmental decisions are made today.

While early environmental communication work was not limited to rhetorical theory, a range of important environmental communication theory has emerged from the application of rhetorical theory, including historical explorations of the *sublime response* to nature and explanations of the rhetorical uses of the *locus of the irreparable* in

environmental issues. More recent rhetorical research has theorized about the ways environmental activists use widely televised *image events*, such as the positioning of activist boats between whaling harpoon and whale or the occupying of old-growth trees marked for logging, in efforts to confront profit-motive-driven industrialism with community and ecological needs. Other scholars have used rhetorical theory to grapple with ways the inventional resources of melodrama might transform environmental controversies and oppose dominant discourses that rationalize or obscure environmental threats and to explore how certain Native communities' arguments are excluded from decisions about where to store nuclear waste. Many of these studies critically expand on notions and theories of rhetoric by focusing on the reproductive and transformative potentials of such forms of environmental communication.

Recent work using critical rhetorical theory also points to crossovers with critical discourse analysis, a largely European theoretical and methodological tradition. Critical discourse analysis is often used to explore human-nature issues in the discipline of ecolinguistics, the parallel or sister discipline of environmental communication, which has a strong presence in Europe. As in critical discourse analysis and ecolinguistics, critical efforts to ground rhetorical theory in issues of power and the material world have been central to environmental communication research. Some environmental communication rhetorical theorists have turned to theories outside rhetoric and communication to purposefully ground their work in the environmental and social spheres. For instance, some environmental communication rhetoric scholars have incorporated social systems theory to explore more holistic analyses of human-nature relations. Others have turned to political economy and political ecology to explain how rhetorical representations of the environment reflect and reproduce a particular political economy of interests.

### Material-Symbolic Discourse

Because environmental communication research looks at human society as well as the natural world beyond the human, many environmental communication scholars have been interested in discourse theory informed by poststructuralism, as well as

contemporary disciplines such as science studies and cultural studies. Informed by these traditions, many environmental communication scholars view our systems of representation as both symbolic and material. This means that scholars view the material world as helping to shape communication and communication as helping to shape the material world.

An example is the word *environment*. *Environment* is a symbol we dominantly use in Western culture to describe the natural world in a way that connotes a material nature that surrounds us and is separate from us. The symbol, or metaphor, of *environment* is not only shaped by material and symbolic Western historical and contemporary relations with nature, but also helps to shape our contemporary ideas of and actions toward nature, allowing us to perceive and treat the living world as separate from and often as secondary to the human species. Environmental communication scholars explain that the word *environment* reflects anthropocentric, or human-centered, cultural views of and relations with the living Earth. At the same time, the dominant use of the term *environment* to describe nature helps to reproduce such anthropocentric views, reconstructing perceptions that allow for exploitive and destructive actions that continuously materially shape the biosphere.

The ontological orientation of viewing discourse as both material and symbolic necessarily brings issues of power to the forefront of theories of environmental communication. Communication about the "environment" is embedded within social systems and within the power that is negotiated within these systems. As such, social, cultural, economic, and ideological forces inform representations of nature, constraining or allowing for particular ways of communicating about the "environment." Societal responses to ecological degradation are filtered through dominant systems of environmental representation. Environmental communication scholars critique and raise awareness about existing dominant discourses that are harmful to the environment. In doing so, they look, not only at communication that is directly about the environment, but also at communication that is not necessarily about the environment but that has an impact on the environment—such as neoliberal discourses of free trade that indirectly cause enormous environmental damage.

In addition, environmental communication scholars explore and theorize about alternative ways of speaking about human relations with nature that may be beneficial to the biosphere. Some environmental communication scholars theorize that such alternative ways of communicating about nature may help human society overcome or subvert destructive culturally dominant ways of relating with nature. In this way, while environmental communication scholars are interested in exploring the ways symbols, such as "environment," might be shaped by worldviews that situate humans as separate from and often superior to nature, scholars are also often interested in illustrating other representations of human-nature relations that might allow for different views and inform different actions.

### Mediating Human-Nature Relations

Environmental communication scholars have explored the notion that communication *mediates* human-nature relations in a variety of ways and from a variety of orientations. On one hand, much like a material-symbolic discursive approach to environmental communication, this theory of communication mediating nature understands human communication as mediating human views and actions toward nature. Studies that explore this notion include rhetorical critiques of core cultural environmental narratives that find human-nature or culture-nature binaries as ideological organizing factors; critical reads of popular media representations of nature that find the reproduction or the undoing of dominant environmental narratives; and interpretations of ways that attitudes of ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism, or ecocentrism might inform the communication of everyone, from the average citizen to environmental advocates. Still others have investigated how multiple and varied discourses mediate notions and relations with nature in single everyday utterances.

On the other hand, some environmental communication scholars are also interested in how nature might mediate communication. In this sense, these scholars are interested not only in how human representations of nature mediate views of and actions toward nature, but also in how nature "speaks." This theoretical move is symptomatic of an environmental communication scholarly

orientation that sees importance in how nature is represented in research. Just as many environmental communication scholars view dominant Western environmental discourse as separating nature from the human, many also see much academic research as doing the same kind of work in creating culture-nature binaries. In countless examples of communication research and other humanities, social-science, and physical-science research, nature is represented as a mute object, separated from humans, which exists as a static background, as an economic resource, or as an object to which things are done.

In situating nature as an integrated and dynamic communicatory participant that has a role in mediating human-nature relations, environmental communication scholars explore ways of understanding and articulating environmental copresence. This more recent theoretical move in environmental communication scholarship is an attempt not only to explain but also to subvert anthropocentric and hierarchical articulations of human-nature relations. To aid in this endeavor, some environmental communication scholars have turned to existing theory, such as phenomenology, which stitches the human back into the fabric of the Earth. Others have worked to articulate a materialist theory of communication in order to overcome the objectification of nature in constitutive theories. Others have empirically illustrated ways people of Western cultures discuss nature "speaking." Still others argue that nature, or the "extrahuman," must be included not only in communication but also in democratic practices.

All these approaches represent a notable departure from a traditional communication scholarship theoretical assumption that communication is what makes humans different from other animals or delineates us from nature as human. Here, instead, the scholarly effort is to undo such binary assumptions and to include nature in an effort to hear the interaction of myriad voices of the ecosystems of which humanity is a part.

### Applied and Activist Theory

Much environmental communication scholarship is critically engaged not only with understanding human-nature relations but also in aiding somehow in social-environmental change. This aid ranges from scholars articulating via theory and

research how communication helps to shape and shift nature all the way to explicitly activist research in which theory directly emerges and/or is directly applied to particular socioenvironmental situations in an effort to help enact transformation.

Recent conversations within environmental communication have been particularly interested in the ethical role of scholars. Some researchers have gone so far as to claim that environmental communication is a *crisis discipline* because it deals either directly or indirectly with pressing issues such as climate crisis, endangered species, and toxic pollution. Much as the trans-discipline of conservation biology strives to illustrate and explain the biological elements of ecological collapse in an attempt to both halt and reverse this collapse, some claim environmental communication scholars have an ethical duty to not only try to explain but also help change the society that has caused ecological collapse and at the same time not responded adequately to this crisis.

Environmental communication scholars who are driven by this urgency to address the environmental failures and healing possibilities of communication not only explore and critique discourses but also often engage directly in these discourses by facilitating public processes, sharing critiques with discourse producers, and even providing alternative discourses that are more sustainable. Some environmental communication scholars choose research sites that involve environmental activism and in turn raise awareness about existing alternative or resistant discourses by writing about such practices (e.g., toxic tours led by marginalized communities). Some scholars study emerging sites of environmental action in an effort to articulate effective activist practices (e.g., studies of climate crisis activism such as the recent nationally networked Step It Up actions designed to address global warming). Still others choose sites and approaches to their research that ensure they are not only observers but also participants in the environmental work going on in their research sites (e.g., as volunteers for environmental protection groups or as active participants in environmental movements).

Many of these scholars develop theories that they apply directly to the sites they study in an effort to try to change unjust or unproductive environmental practices in these settings. For instance,

the theory of the *trinity of public participation* attempts to illustrate the role of practical theory in both planning and evaluating the effectiveness of participatory processes regarding contentious environmental issues. Another example includes the theory of *self-in-place*, which has been applied to everything from public participation in informing adaptive environmental management to exploring ways to understand and combat urban sprawl. Thus, in a variety of ways, some environmental communication scholars both apply existing theory and generate new theory in efforts to contribute to the empowerment of citizens to act on environmental issues.

Tema Milstein

*See also* Constructivism; Critical Discourse Analysis; Critical Rhetoric; Critical Theory; Cultural Studies; Culture and Communication; Ideology; Materiality of Discourse; Performance Theories; Phenomenology; Popular Culture Theories; Poststructuralism; Power and Power Relations; Rhetorical Theory

#### Further Readings

- Cantrill, J. G., & Oravec, C. L. (Eds.). (1996). *The symbolic earth: Discourse and our creation of the environment*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Carbaugh, D. (1999). "Just listen": "Listening" and landscape among the Blackfeet. *Western Journal of Communication*, 63(3), 250-270.
- Cox, R. (2007). Nature's "crisis disciplines": Does environmental communication have an ethical duty? *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Culture and Nature*, 1, 5-20.
- DeLuca, K. M. (1999). *Image politics: The new rhetoric of environmental activism*. New York: Guilford.
- Herndl, C. G., & Brown, S. C. (Eds.). (1996). *Green culture: Environmental rhetoric in contemporary America*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Marafiotte, T., & Plec, E. (2006). From dualisms to dialogism: Hybridity in discourse about the natural world. *The Environmental Communication Yearbook*, 3, 49-75.
- Milstein, T. (2008). When whales "speak for themselves": Communication as a mediating force in wildlife tourism. *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 2, 173-192.
- Muir, S. A., & Veenendall, T. L. (Eds.). (1996). *Earthtalk: Communication empowerment for environmental action*. Westport, CT: Praeger Press.

- Oravec, C. L. (1984). Conservationism vs. preservationism: The public interest in the Hetch-Hetchy controversy. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 444-458.
- Peterson, M. N., Peterson, M. J., & Peterson, T. R. (2007). Environmental communication: Why this crisis discipline should facilitate environmental democracy. *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 1, 74-86.
- Pezzullo, P. C. (2007). *Toxic tourism: Rhetorics of pollution, travel, and environmental justice*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Rogers, R. A. (1998). Overcoming the objectification of nature in constitutive theories: Toward a transhuman, materialist theory of communication. *Western Journal of Communication*, 62, 244-272.
- Schwarze, S. (2006). Environmental melodrama. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 92, 239-261.
- Senecah, S. (2004). The trinity of voice: The role of practical theory in planning and evaluating the effectiveness of environmental participatory processes. In S. P. Depoe, J. W. Delicath, & M.-F. A. Elsenbeer (Eds.), *Communication and public participation in environmental decision making* (pp. 13-33). Albany: State University of New York Press.

---

## EPISTEMOLOGY

---

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that considers the nature, scope, and limits of human knowledge. The term derives from the Greek language: *epistēmē* (knowledge; from *epistasthai* = know, know how to do) and *logos* (study of the nature and properties of, logic or theory). Epistemologists ask whether and to what extent knowledge is based on the existence of phenomena and/or on human perceptions. Their goal is to provide a general basis that would ensure the possibility of knowledge. A continuum of epistemological assumptions exists, ranging from the perspective that there is an objective "real" truth that humans can discover to the perspective that humans create their own meanings, resulting in the possibility of many meanings for a particular object or event. With respect to human communication theory, every theory includes assumptions about the nature of knowledge and how humans obtain knowledge. Epistemology provides background understanding about how to examine the

interconnections between aspects of human communication and the best research protocol to serve as an instrument of knowledge for understanding human communication. Discussions related to processes of scholarly inquiry and theory development are inevitably grounded in epistemological issues.

### History of Epistemology

The philosophical area of epistemology dates back to antiquity. During the 5th century BCE, an ongoing debate between various schools existed regarding what counts as knowledge and how we come to know what we think we know. The Sophists questioned the possibility of reliable and objective knowledge. Plato rebutted the Sophists by proposing the existence of a world of unchanging abstract forms about which it is possible to have exact and certain knowledge through reasoning. Aristotle maintained that almost all knowledge is built from experience. If people think they have a proper knowledge of something, then they know the reason or cause of the thing. This requires understanding an object within a context of explanatory propositions. Pyrrho founded a school of skeptical philosophy in the period following Aristotelian philosophy. The Skeptics maintained that they were inquirers, refusing to acknowledge claims to knowledge unless a criterion of truth could be established. The rival philosophical schools, particularly the Stoics and Epicureans, tried to produce such a criterion—something in experience that had the mark of certain truth. During the Middle Ages, philosophers blended rational methods and faith into a unified system of beliefs, restoring confidence in reason and experience.

The shift to modern philosophy is often taken to be the publication of René Descartes's *Meditations* in 1641, since it posits a radical break with the Aristotelian scholastic tradition. During Descartes's time there was a renewed interest in skepticism. There are several varieties of skepticism, including views that there can be no knowledge of other persons or other minds, no knowledge of the past, no knowledge of contingent truths, and even the stance that nothing can be known. Descartes sought a sure foundation for knowledge by employing his *method of doubt*, a form of systematic skepticism, created to ascertain what could