

INTRODUCTION

Regulation and Communicative Practices

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In recent years, scholars have become increasingly interested in studying routine or regularized discourse and its connections to the many institutions within which people act. This interest has emerged for a number of reasons, including the rapid evolution of digitally mediated communication and the upheaval of organizational structures in such realms of activity as business, government, and education. At the same time, theories of communication have become increasingly complex, beginning to account for such considerations as power, contingency, and unpredictability and their relationship to the practice of routine or regularized communication. As we observed research interests developing along these lines and attempted to understand the ideas at play in the related scholarship, it became increasingly evident to us that the moment had arrived for organizing a collection that begins to account for routine or regularized communicative practices in workplaces and professions.

Scholars publishing on this issue work in diverse fields of study (e.g., rhetoric, cultural studies, and organizational communication), and often use distinctly different theoretical perspectives (e.g., genre, narrative, and ethnomethodology). Consequently, what we perceived as an important, emerging concern in communication scholarship (in the broadest sense) lacked a named, central concept that would readily cross fields of study and allow us to talk about the enterprise at large. Recognizing that any starting point for organizing talk about this as-yet unnamed concern in communication studies would necessarily be somewhat arbitrary, we decided to bring together scholars situated in varied disciplines and theoretical camps and to ask them to grapple with what we proposed to be a

central concept that seemed to unite aspects of their scholarly work. The concept we proposed was regulation. It was a concept that was not immediately identified with the work of any of these scholars, which had the benefit of placing all the contributors in roughly the same situation: aligning their thinking around a concept that had potential but unarticulated connections to their earlier work.

REGULATION AND COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES

For many readers, the verb regulate is probably most immediately associated with rule making by a governmental or administrative body. A fundamental pair of activities for such bodies, after all, is to create and enforce regulations. It is commonplace, then, to associate regulations with either the law or administrative policies as the authorized, explicit controls imposed by an entity that is constituted for such purposes. In this context, regulations have a clear and often direct connection with the communicative practices of workplaces and professions. For example, any given business is required to report certain types of information to appropriate regulating agencies, or a credentialing board may require that the individuals it certifies document their yearly activities.

While these obvious and widespread forms of regulation are important and merit scholarly attention, the activity of regulation as it has emerged in recent scholarship is focused in other, less apparent areas, too. Beyond the explicit controls of governmental and administrative bodies, a complex configuration of factors exists that orders the communicative practices in which people in workplaces and professions engage. These factors include such things as groups of people regulating their own speech and writing to conform to professional norms, as well as individuals tacitly agreeing to suppress their opinions to avoid conflicts that could jeopardize their jobs. Examining how communicative practices come to be self-regulated by factors like these is as important as understanding those regulatory controls explicitly imposed by an external body because both always work concurrently. That is, communicative activities are regulated in multiple, interconnected ways. This multiplicity and how it works, however, has emerged as a fairly recent concern for communication scholars—a development that we briefly overview later in this introduction.

Yet another fundamental consideration in the study of regulation and communicative practices is that the relationship between the two is not unidirectional. Regulation is not something that is imposed on communicative practices by an external force, regardless of whether that force is an authorized body such as the government or the communicator herself. Regulation is always itself constituted and sustained by communicative practices. That is, the existence of regulation is contingent upon the communicative practices that define and enable it, just as the existence of those practices is contingent upon the regulatory forces that make them meaningful. The ratios and workings of this relationship, however, are

only scarcely discussed by scholars—a situation that this collection is designed to help address.

Together, the contributors to this collection offer a provocatively complex picture of what regulation means and the means of regulation. The workplace or professional sites that the authors use as illustrations in their studies are diverse, covering such organizations as an Internet start-up company, an international energy company, an urban hospital, a university, and a telecommunications corporation. The perspectives the contributors bring to bear on their work cover a range of prominent thinkers, including sociological theorists (e.g., Bourdieu, Giddens, and Latour), philosophers (e.g., Habermas, Foucault, and Deleuze), and textual theorists (Spivak, Bakhtin, and Burke). In total, the perspectives offered by these contributors are invaluable for researchers who want to gain greater insight into routine or regularized discourse and its connections to the many institutions within which people act.

THE EMERGENCE OF SCHOLARLY ATTENTION BEING PAID TO REGULATED COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES

Over the last 25 years, a large and diverse group of communication scholars has been exploring relationships between workplace and professional communication and an ever-expanding constellation of factors that help account for how that communication is practiced. Working from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, scholars engaged in this exploration have largely worked without the benefit of a basic set of shared terms that would bring some unity to their many invaluable but disparate projects. As I indicated earlier, a primary purpose for this collection is to begin putting some shape to this exploration.

The idea of regulation, when it is defined along the lines of relationality and contingency described above, has a somewhat shorter lineage in communication studies. It emerges in the work of people thinking about communication from a social constructionist perspective in the late 1980s. In these early instances, some overarching framework is proposed as central to understanding how communicative practices are regulated (or, to use a common term in this work, shaped). So, for example, a given profession might be advanced as the central explanatory feature of a certain type of discourse (e.g., Selzer, 1983). Likewise, a given organization could serve a similar role (e.g., Doheny-Farina, 1986). Organizational context, in fact, became a dominant explanatory feature for understanding the practice of professional communication (e.g., Driskell, 1989). At the same time, scholars were pushing for increasingly complex understandings of context (Harrison, 1987).

Some of those whose work was associated with social constructionist perspectives, for example, were increasingly likely to expand the idea of context so

that its implied boundaries became more and more difficult to imagine. Pare (1994), for one, interrogates the idea of a discourse community, observing that many factors account for how discourse is regulated. Only some of these factors, he demonstrates, are accounted for in “standardized documentation,” while other factors are implicit (p. 112). As he explains, “the dynamics of discourse regulations” can be understood through a “web of relationships,” which extends through “complex connections” (pp. 114-115). In similar fashion, Porter (1993) argues that “the significant parameters” that need to be accounted for to understand professional writing “will be neither the discipline nor the corporation—but rather . . . a diverse network of concerns, extending among corporations, disciplines, and citizens” (p. 141). This network of concerns includes such extra-organizational considerations as cultural values, ethical/moral codes, and public policy and law (p. 142).

The few pieces cited here are suggestive of a larger trend in communication studies to turn toward increasingly complex accounts of why communicative practices exist as they do. These accounts were called by many “social” (see, for example, the overview of “the social perspective” in Blyler & Thralls, 1993), as communication scholars worked in and around the current of social-constructionist thinking. Such thinking is still being productively pursued (including by some participants in this collection), though many have over the last decade opted to abandon the social as an organizing principle because they want to move beyond the essentialist associations that many people now assign to social constructionism. Rather than arguing for a refined definition of the social, these scholars turn toward nonessentialized conceptions of culture to account for how language and other practices function in human experience. For many, this turn toward a cultural perspective allows researchers greater opportunity to consider the contingent and always unpredictable play of such factors as gender, ideology, and history in how communication is practiced. This turn has also brought with it (and enabled) new ways of conceptualizing communicative practices, many of which are represented in this collection.

KEY IDEAS IN THE STUDY OF REGULATED COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES

In their efforts to make sense of how communicative practices are regulated in the sense suggested above, scholars have drawn new attention to issues that were often elided or oversimplified in earlier communication studies. In particular, these scholars have all pointed to inescapable problems associated with treating communicative practices as discrete, codifiable events in which a known set of elements (e.g., text, author, and audience) operates. As these new scholars insist, any boundary drawn around a communication event is always artificial, inevitably ruling out some thing(s) that interact with whatever has been ruled in. For this reason alone, it is always therefore impossible to isolate all the elements

that are at play in the practice of communication. Or, for that matter, it is likewise impossible to assign an autonomous and definable existence to elements that have been identified.

The quandary for scholars working from this position, then, is how to talk at all about communicative practices as they exist in the world. If, as these scholars assume, the discrete elements involved do not offer sufficient explanatory power for understanding how the practices of communication are regulated, then what are we to make of these elements? And, more importantly, where might we next turn to understand regulation? Rather than overly emphasizing the importance of constituent elements in the practice of communication, scholars who are concerned with regulation tend to foreground whole other sets of issues in which such elements are only of marginal significance. Focusing on whatever it is that makes the practice of communication regular rather than on the elements of artificially defined communication events, these scholars tend to be concerned with three broad, overlapping sets of issues: relationality, situatedness, and agency.

Relationality

A key consideration in studying the regulation of communicative practices is accounting for how those practices relate to the order of things around them. For example, a scholar studying communicative practices in an organization is likely to first look to in-house protocols, style guidelines, habits, etc. when attempting to understand how members of that organization communicate with one another and external entities such as government bodies or the public. Similarly, a scholar attempting to account for the communicative practices of a professional group might consult relevant professional journals, technical dictionaries of language and usage, and even academic textbooks to understand how members of that profession initially learn and then become enculturated to communicate in the ways that they do. A general movement in such scholarship, however, is the growing realization that a simple theory of relationality is inadequate for coming to a deep understanding of the regulation of communicative practices. That is, when a scholar attempts to map causal relationships between the communicative practices of a workplace organization or a profession and such things as a published style guideline or a technical dictionary, communication as it is practiced always exceeds or otherwise defies the explanatory power of the object it is being mapped against. Ultimately, then, scholars who are attempting to form a deep understanding of communicative practices tend to turn toward increasingly complex theories of relationality.

A central premise in these complex theories of relationality is contingency. In different ways, many communication scholars working in this area now operate from the premise that communicative practices are always *possibly* but also always *uncertainly* accounted for in their relationship to the order of things

around them. In other words, communicative practices do not stand in a logical and necessary relationship with any external entity, though in any given instance such a relationship may be at play. This realization manifests itself in different ways in communication scholarship, ranging from strongly hedged claims in an account of how certain communicative practices evolved to studied examinations of contingency at play in a given organization's corpus of public texts.

Situatedness

For scholars attempting to understand how communicative practices are regulated, the issue of situatedness is another prominent consideration. As I mentioned earlier, much of the early work on this issue was framed in terms of studying context where the term *context* served as a sort of catchall for all those things that were known to surround a communication event but that could not be isolated as an integral element of the communication event. In other words, context stood in as a reduction for everything that could not be counted as the communication itself or as the originator and receiver of the communication. The challenge for scholars using this metaphor was twofold: first, the lines drawn between the communication event and everything else around it proved to be notoriously difficult to draw in a meaningful way, and second, it was impossible to reasonably bound what does or does not count as the context for a given communication event. Consequently, to invoke the idea of a context that exists separately from communication, but yet could provide an adequate explanatory framework for understanding how an act of communication was regulated, has proven for many scholars to be unsatisfactory.

Steering away from the problematic and ultimately misleading metaphor of context, many communication scholars now prefer more complex metaphors such as networks, open systems, and rhizomes for talking about the situatedness of communicative practices. Theorizing communicative practices is no less difficult when using these alternative metaphors, but these metaphors have the advantage of seeming less fixed than context. That is, these metaphors emphasize the recombinant, extensible, and expansive situatedness of communicative practices, allowing researchers to avoid the subject/object or center/periphery relations that are associated with studies focused on context. For this reason, these alternative metaphors have proven to be more engaging tools for thinking about the regulation of communicative practices, calling attention, in complex ways, to such interrelated ideas as time, space, material resources, and power.

Agency

A final, overarching issue of concern for scholars considering how communicative practices are regulated is agency, or the identity position occupied by the participants. From a humanist perspective, people involved in communication are traditionally assumed to be autonomous, self-regulating individuals. A skilled

author, for example, is someone who is disciplined in the art of crafting texts. Likewise, a reader is treated as an individual capable of drawing upon her own ideas to critically receive and measure the words of an author. For various reasons and in many different ways, most scholars thinking about communication have abandoned such traditional humanist conceptions of agency. In particular, most communication scholars now operate with a more complex understanding of individuality, generally accepting the idea that people do not operate as autonomous, self-regulating entities. Instead, people are understood to be complex sites of conflicting social, biological, educational, and other materially conditioned factors that are not of their own devising. In addition, people are always positioned in ways that limit their apparent volition. For scholars, these limits challenge the extent to which people may be said to possess agency when they are engaged in communication practices. Obviously, then, questions about who and what is regulating communicative actions become more complicated.

For many scholars, this line of thinking has migrated toward a posthuman perspective on communication. No longer are individuals assumed to be the sole possessors of the agency and intelligence that regulates communicative practices. Instead, agency and intelligence are treated as properties distributed between humans, machines, and interfaces, thereby essentially displacing human actors to more marginal positions. At the same time, though, there are many other scholars who prefer to continue working in the humanist tradition by arguing for more sophisticated definitions of what a human is and how agency is constituted.

As readers of this collection will note, the issues of relationality, situatedness, and agency can be explored in many different ways, but they are never too far removed from central concerns of scholars in this area.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The participants in this collection offer varied perspectives on the idea of regulation and its relationship to communicative practices in workplaces and the professions. For some, the idea of regulation serves as a central organizing concept for their chapters; for others, regulation functions as a secondary concern for illuminating a related theoretical perspective or illustrative research study. Chapters in Part I of the volume are primarily concerned with helping readers understand regulative processes, practices, and effects. In Part II, then, the focus shifts to considering agency and power in terms of their connection with regulation. Finally, in Part III, the chapters focus primarily on offering research perspectives that have the potential to influence how scholars critically study regulation and communicative practices.

Dorothy Winsor begins Part I with “Using Texts to Manage Continuity and Change in an Activity System,” which examines the centrality of texts in the regulation of human activities. As she demonstrates, the regulatory effects of texts are complicated by a number of factors including continuous change in the

systems within which humans act and the competing goals of those who must act with and around the texts. Winsor supplements cultural/historical activity theory with the work of Bourdieu and Foucault to examine how the regulatory effects of charter documents are negotiated in subsequent, subsidiary texts.

In Chapter 2, “Regularized Practices: Genres, Improvisation, and Identity Formation in Health-Care Professions,” Catherine F. Schryer, Lorelei Lingard, and Marlee Spafford study how students attempting to join health-care professions engage with regulated resources of their intended profession and with regularized ways of knowing within that profession. The authors draw a distinction between regulation, which they associate with external controls, and the regularized actions of humans, meaning the actions into which agents opt to order themselves. Using the work of Bourdieu, Giddens, activity theorists, and genre theorists, the authors examine how participating in the situated practice of case presentations regularizes professional identities for health-care students.

Clay Spinuzzi’s Chapter 3, “Who Killed Rex?: Tracing a Message through Three Kinds of Networks,” explores two prominent variations of sociocultural theory, activity, theory and actor/network theory to consider how the material regulation of human activities is accounted for in each theory. Using primarily the works of Engeström and Latour, Spinuzzi considers the concept of self-regulation in three networks, each providing its own perspective into the work of a telecommunications company. As he demonstrates, the ideas that might be commonly associated with self-regulation—agency, cognition, and responsibility—are differently configured depending upon the network perspective from which they are viewed. Such reconfigurations, he contends, are ultimately productive for researchers.

Recasting regulation in terms of constraint and enablement, JoAnne Yates and Wanda Orlikowski’s Chapter 4, “The PowerPoint Presentation and its Corollaries: How Genres Shape Communicative Action in Organizations,” examines the shifting practices of conventional communication in the interplay of new technology and human improvisation with it. They introduce the concept of corollary genres to account for inflections in conventional discursive practice as people explore how a new technology can enable or constrain their communicative actions. Giddens’ structuration theory is coupled with the work of genre theorists as the authors engage in a historical study of business presentations and then examine the uses of PowerPoint in different organizational contexts.

Chapter 5, Martin Ruef’s “Reason and Rationalization: Modes of Argumentation Among Health-Care Professionals,” considers rationality and its relationship to the regulation of professional authority in health care. After outlining an expanded definition of rationality, Ruef reports the results of a systematic, empirical analysis of modes of argumentation composed for different professional audiences in health care. He considers how factions of a given profession contest the regulation of their professional communication.

Kenneth Gergen's Chapter 6, "Writing and Relationship in Academic Culture," challenges the primacy of traditional and, therefore, conventionally regulated forms in academic writing. He notes the undesirable implications of such forms, arguing that they lead to isolated subcultures within the academic world. As an alternative, Gergen proposes relational genres of expression that expose the writer to the reading audience in unconventional ways. Developing a social constructionist approach to communicating via new forms of representation, he advocates that the regulatory force of traditional forms, particularly those that are perpetuated in the natural sciences, should be replaced by a new paradigm.

Leading Part II of the collection, which focuses more explicitly on questions of agency, empowerment, and power, is Carl G. Herndl and Adela C. Licona's "Shifting Agency: Agency, *Kairos*, and the Possibilities of Social Action." Looking at how social action is made possible in varied and changing social spaces and practices, Herndl and Licona develop a theory of agency that rejects the idea that agency is something that individuals can possess, arguing instead that agency is something that is enacted in the midst of shifting sets of social and subjective relationships. They theorize the idea of "constrained agency," which designates the time- and space-bound potential for agency in the presence of the regulating forces of authority.

Dave Clark's Chapter 8, "Rhetoric of Empowerment: Genre, Activity, and the Distribution of Capital," interrogates the very idea of worker empowerment, showing how power is always inherently regulated within organizational networks in ways that belie narratives of empowerment. Replacing the traditional binary explanation of organizational power with an explanation based on "the broad array of discourses, technologies, professions, traditions, and capital that regulate," Clark argues for a cultural approach to understanding what power is and how it operates in organizations.

Chapter 9, Barbara Schneider's "Power as Interactional Accomplishment: An Ethnomethodological Perspective on the Regulation of Communicative Practice in Organizations," advances the argument that conceptualizations of power as something that is simply possessed or inherent in a hierarchical position are misguided. Power, instead, is something that is accomplished by individuals engaged in the communicative practices of everyday social interactions. She contends that power is integrally connected to how the participants in social interactions regulate their communicative activities. And while these participants may orient their activities around "rules of particular genres of discourse," those rules in themselves do not regulate communicative practices.

The final Part of the collection focuses on critical research perspectives, beginning with Brenton Faber's "Discourse and Regulation: Critical Text Analysis and Workplace Studies." In this chapter, Faber offers a research perspective for how forces of change and resistance are regulated within workplaces. Specifically, he argues for examining macro and micro discursive features in organizational texts to arrive at a critical account of the play of regulatory actions.

In conducting a critical text analysis of an organizational effort to implement a new information technology platform, Faber examines “the social aspects of regulation and the ways regulatory discourse can take place as simultaneously multiple, coordinated discursive actions.”

David M. Boje offers narrative theorists a new research perspective with “The Antenarrative Cultural Turn in Narrative Studies” in Chapter 11. Observing that the coherent structure of narratives (with their beginnings, middles, and ends) inherently regulates how something is known, Boje asks what researchers are to make of all the fragmented texts that circulate within organizations but are not regulated by narrative structures. Antenarrative, he suggests, provides a useful way of understanding and accounting for such stories that circulate before and around proper organizational narratives. Using events at Enron to illustrate his theory, Boje examines the multiple and conflicting antenarratives that complicate the official narrative of what happened with this failed company.

This final part of the collection concludes with Robert P. Gephart, Jr.’s “Hearing Discourse.” Gephart advocates a critical/interpretive approach to analyzing regulated communicative practices such as those that occur at governmental hearings. His approach, which combines narrative/rhetorical analysis, ethnomethodology, and Habermasian critical theory of speech acts, offers insight into how organizations are produced in and through communicative practices. Gephart uses his study of public hearings related to a fatal oil-pipeline fire to illustrate how this perspective enables researchers to examine formalized communicative practices with new insights. Through this example, too, Gephart advances the argument that regulatory effects are not unidirectional.

The 12 chapters offered in this collection provide thoughtful perspectives on how we can understand the nature and work of regulation in the communicative practices of workplaces and the professions. Inviting scholars working from different theoretical perspectives and with different methodologies to think about regulation in this regard, we hoped that the collection would help advance a conversation about an important concept in communication studies. While the chapters offer many points of convergence or complementary argumentative trajectories, there are also clearly differences among these perspectives. In all cases, our hope is that the collection points to ideas to be examined by researchers working from varied backgrounds who share an interest in coming to a deeper understanding of communicative practices in workplaces and the professions.

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Index