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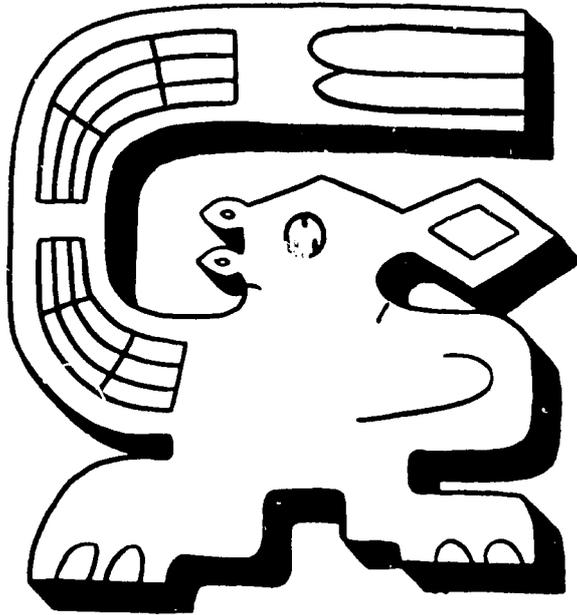
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September 1973

LTC Reprint No. 102

U.S. ISSN 0084-0807



Conceptual Limits of Development Communications Theory

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53706

Reprinted from *Sociologia Ruralis*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, 1973.

CONCEPTUAL LIMITS OF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATIONS THEORY

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Theoretical work in the field of development communications has been directed primarily toward constructing models to show the relationships between communication processes and developmental processes. These efforts have also included the study of communication as an instrument to trigger social and economic change. Various commentaries (Drucker, 1968; Myrdal, 1970; Schiller, 1971) point to the problems of evolving improved communication models considering that both development and communication are broad and elusive concepts. Furthermore, diverse and sometimes conflicting models have been used to describe these theoretical concepts. But more specifically, a case can be made that inappropriate formulations (Stinchcombe, 1968) of how communication functions in relation to social and economic systems have guided the course of research and the selection of data so as to leave unresolved many of the issues of how communication and development interact.

There are at least two sources of difficulty. One is the regular practice of drawing operational examples and analogies from the experiences of developed rather than underdeveloped countries. The second results from the use of inappropriate and frequently untested theoretical models within communication research – a practice which is perpetuated by senior scientists and beginning students alike. Few investigators have broad perspectives of both communication and development needed to bring the two fields together. In addition, as Ellul (1964) points out, many of the views of communication have been highly influenced by the impact of 20th century organization and technology on the society rather than by the quality of the theoretical

formulations available to study such matters. Students of communication in U.S. graduate schools have tended to emphasize the amassing of data rather than the examination of the theoretical foundations of knowledge. Finally, one could add, there are occasional semantic difficulties in distinguishing what specialists mean by information as opposed to communication or other behavioral traits, but these are probably not among the most serious matters.

To be clear about our usage in this paper, *information* will be used to refer to message content - that is the material which is moved around in communication processes. *Communication* will be used to refer to the social, organizational and psychological dynamics of human message transmission and reception - that is, the processes which describe information flows as well as their effects on senders and receivers and the processes whereby meanings themselves are changed. The *processing of information* as a function, therefore, is part of communication by these definitions.

COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The study of communication in developing countries has generally followed one of two main approaches. The first has been to focus on correlational relationships between the growth in mass media systems and changes in indicators of social, political and economic progress. The other has been to categorize and measure the social and behavioral traits of technicians or traditional persons (primarily peasants) and to correlate these with assorted communication and information variables such as message reception, technical knowledge, comprehension and information seeking behavior (Rogers, 1969). The dominant intellectual and resource investments in communication research during the last decade (excluding electronics and engineering) appear to have been made in this area. The stress has been on finding ways to stimulate, induce and coerce traditional people with words and language, as well as guns and butter, to change their attitudes and actions so they will begin to behave more nearly like entrepreneurs in the industrialized nations.¹

Efforts to develop macro communication models were greatly stimulated when Lerner (1958, 1963) suggested that a predictable correlational relationship existed between growth in national mass media systems and the expansion of public goods industries and political participation. Analyses encompassing interpersonal and cognitive processes associated with communication have also been

included in development studies. Work on communication and cognition was originated primarily by psychologists, and is carried on in or near their centers, which means most of the effort is concentrated in the United States and Western Europe.²

Experience from the developing nations reemphasizes the need to draw examples of communication processes, more explicitly than has been done, from situations and practices in the poor countries. Freire (1970) illustrates how, without such points of reference, communication theory is pulled further and further away from the realities confronting the major population groups in the third world. Not all of the fault lies with the study of communication itself. Part of the issue rests also with what we mean by development.

DEVELOPMENT AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESS

There are no simple accepted definitions, but most agree that development consists of processes such as the creation of new social, economic and political alternatives. Current development theories generally assume advancements come by improving the efficiency of economic and political systems which are already installed and operating. But experience suggests (Dorner, 1971; Moore, 1966) that progress often follows a different path - that basic transformations of present institutions are required before new economic and social opportunities, higher productivity and greater participation are possible.

Two careful and detailed studies made in Colombia, one by Haney (1969) in a rural community and the other by Drake (1971) in a regional capital, relate social status, productivity and economic progress to the restraints and incentives provided by the community infrastructure. Haney (1969) concludes in the rural study that most farmers and workers in the community are locked into a permanent cycle of poverty by a highly complex set of local and national institutions which constantly erode savings, investments and technological gains. Development for these farm operators is not possible without changing the institutional norms of local and national service, supply and ceremonial organizations in a way that will actually change production, consumption and community decision relationships. New agricultural technology is controlled by the country's land and capital owning interests and the federated commodity corporations. These structural arrangements force farmers to commit their own limited land and capital resources to traditional subsistence enterprises and to supply their excess labor to the production of commercial products

which in turn are regulated by contractual arrangements with village merchants, middlemen and professionals.

Drake (1971) similarly concludes that persons in established economic, political and social positions in the community are able to control resources, power and channels of communication so as to effectively neutralize those who try to alter the rules of the community. The role and effect of communication is dictated by the larger structure and has no analytical meaning unless the nature of that structure is first explained. To put it another way, the role of communication in development is defined *by* the structure, not *apart* from it.

BIAS IN FAVOR OF TECHNOLOGY

Development communications research has often been based on U.S. experience, suggesting that making information about new technology readily and widely available would make it possible for producers to move to higher levels of productivity. Hancy (1969) and Drake (1971) demonstrate empirically what has been more widely publicized by Myrdal (1970) and Freire (1970). New sources and supplies of information do not release peasant farmers and workers from the complex linkages which control their use of the factors of production and fix their social status in the community.

Students of communication from the U.S., or those trained there, are often biased to favor technology as one of the most important correlates of communication (Havelock, 1970) without considering whether there is an organizational structure to produce and sustain such technology or even whether it would be economically or socially desirable to introduce it. Ellul (1964, p. 45) in his classic statement on technology made more than 15 years ago, points to this new superordinate role of technology in almost all of our affairs: "In the twentieth century, this relationship between scientific research and technical invention resulted in the enslavement of science to technique." With respect to the mass media of communication, he writes (Ellul, 1964, p. 128): "These media require great capital investments. As a result, artistic expression is subordinated to a censorship of money or of the state."

The tendency to equate communication problems with problems in disseminating technical information has led many extension and assistance agencies to virtually ignore social and institutional structures in promoting development. This is even the case in areas where

field workers and educators (Felstehausen, 1969b) realize that information alone cannot change local conditions.

Conveying information to decision makers about technical alternatives or critical action points may be the best way to maximize gains and minimize losses if one is satisfied with the existing range of possibilities. Adopting new technology to maximize output assumes that output will solve development problems and that resource managers indeed control critical variables. Furthermore, it assumes that the general order of the system will be maintained so that decisions about efficiency taken at a given point in time will be rewarded according to the same set of operating criteria which guided their prediction in the first place.

The trouble with these formulations, while they may describe the industrialized world, is that they fail to account for many of the factors which are known to be critical to the final outcome of social, economic, and political affairs in developing countries. Borrowed orientations (Dorner, 1971) are usually found deficient for explaining contemporary problems such as unemployment, poverty, income distribution, race relations, urbanization and environmental protection. Rogers (1969, p. 380), after reviewing scores of studies, suggests in the conclusion to his book about communication among peasants that much of what he reports in the earlier chapters may be incomplete and misdirected because of "...the inappropriate use of culture-bound research methods (largely developed in the United States) in survey studies in less developed countries".

The manner and rate with which new technology is adopted cannot be interpreted independently from the social and economic system where that technology is introduced. The criteria for evaluating communication effectiveness in development are directly affected by the way communication and development are conceptually linked. Communication effectiveness, therefore, has to be evaluated not just on the basis of whether new information influences the behavior of individuals, but whether it influences behavior in such ways as to change the norms and functions of the institutions where those individuals interact. It is not communication which dictates the rules, values, resources, roles and other elements which characterize the level of development in a society. "Skilful communication can change a peasant's perceptions of his situation but it cannot, acting alone, change that situation very much. It can help a backward farmer to see opportunities he ignores, but if few opportunities exist, information will not create them" (Brown & Kears, 1967, p. 25).

LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT THEORY

The second conceptual problem of development communications involves the shortcomings of communication theory itself. The most critical theoretical problem results from two related assumptions. One is that communication is simply the exchange of information between persons; the other is that communication plays an independent role in affecting social change and behavior without an adequate test of such an assumption in developing countries – or elsewhere, for that matter. The assignment of independence may be partly associated with current ideas about the importance of technology, and information about technology for development, but is more specifically a problem involving communication theory itself.

The assumption, that communication causes changes in social systems and behavior, has prompted countless studies to seek out and classify the impact of communication.³ The 'causal links' have been sought primarily through correlational analyses, another fallacy, and have yielded inconclusive results. Meanwhile, the assumptions have become conventional and often blind students to the possibility that new formulations may be needed to resolve communication problems under conditions of social change and development. The experience with actual cases constantly emphasizes the need to clarify the relationships between communication and social, economic and political processes. Setting communication, or any variable, apart as **independent**, or even intervening, diminishes the opportunity to observe the free play of interactions in the overall system.

COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Research on community services provides one example of the inter-related nature of communication processes and social structure. Community institutions provide the channels and the behavioral setting within which information is transmitted and used. It is useful to think of *community* as the framework for social and intellectual interaction where information processing is observed. Community is analogous as a concept to the economists' use of firm and the psychologists' use of individual as units for operationalizing and relating variables. Furthermore, there is a degree of common meaning in the terms *communication* and *community* which is more than accidental.

Community can be defined (Warren, 1963) as persons having some degree of contact with each other for purposes of production, con-

sumption, distribution, socialization, control and opportunity manipulation. Granted, the term community is also arbitrary. Yet without exception, both development and communication take place within communities. From the point of view of providing a border around the diverse activities of human beings (this does not mean a geographic border on a map), the concept of community provides the scope needed to take account of rules, sanctions, status, power, economic motives, customs, beliefs, values and rituals. All are part of the context of human communication, and at the same time, changes in these elements all serve to define progress toward development. It is inconceivable that an assessment of communication effectiveness can be made without taking into account these structures and channels, and the rules which govern the way they function. The following account illustrates this point.

The state government of Antioquia, Colombia (Felstehausen, 1969a), sponsored an extensive study of local government and rural service organizations in 1967-68 as the basis for infrastructural investments and improvements. Public services in Colombia are highly controlled by the central government with the states in turn setting the standards for local action.

Data for the study were gathered in 31 municipalities regarding the availability of six major public services, level and method of financing, organization and administration, and the nature and rate of expansion. Per capita availability of education, transportation, public health and utilities was declining in some communities because of growth in population. As services in outlying areas lagged, rural people migrated to Medellin, the state capital and only large city in the state. The response by many of the state agencies to the results of the survey was to immediately order community officials to step up investments in information and planning programs to inform community leaders about the nature of adequate service systems and to supply them with plans for new construction.

In one service area – roads – there was an opportunity to monitor the responses of the communities for two years (Felstehausen, 1971). During that time not one kilometer of road was built by local government authorities. Road projects which were undertaken were organized privately by local groups who skirted the local system and made contacts through state and national agencies or private groups. A number of case studies revealed that information and technology were available at the operational level, a conclusion attested to by the fact that local groups often undertook and completed road projects

without outside technical assistance. The principal obstacle did not appear to be information. Rather, the rules, rewards and sanctions of the system were organized in such a way that they did not foster the desired action.

CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS

As a theoretical issue, the problem rests with the way the role of communication is conceptualized. Perrow (1970) relates how organization theory has been similarly influenced by the use of models which blocked out important relationships for a long time and left organizational issues unresolved. He recounts the history of 15 years of studies of organizations conducted by psychologists at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. They operated from the widespread view that organizational problems are 'people problems'. As psychologists, they reasoned that explanations of organizations would be found by studying individuals. After several years of work, they still could not find support for what they thought was the most obvious hypothesis - that satisfied workers would be more productive than unsatisfied workers. They (Perrow, 1970, p. 7) made several shifts in their models to provide for a structural approach which yielded better results and finally concluded: "It has become unmistakably clear that the behavior of people in organizations cannot effectively be studied from a psychological viewpoint, traditionally defined".

The study of communications, just like the study of organizations, needs an improved theoretical position which is in harmony with what is known about social structure and development conditions. Bostian (1970, p. 116) provides an example of the problem with a review of the extensive work done with the two-step flow theory in developing countries and concludes: "The two-step flow hypothesis appears to explain very few communication situations and is likely too simplified a concept for great utility in explaining the process of communication".

TOWARD A STRUCTURAL THEORY OF COMMUNICATION

Duncan (1967) says communication study has swung away from social and institutional variables to stress language and psychological factors, yet the experience from the study of human communication shows the futility of trying to examine communication apart from its

social and institutional setting. Duncan (1967, pp. 239-40) offers a helpful beginning for an improved formulation of the role of communication. "Symbols 'mediate', but do not create, social order. ...Any social theory of communication begins with two terms, 'society' and 'communication', and since they must be thought of in some kind of relatedness, we have then to introduce a third term, 'form', the manner in which the relatedness is expressed."

This leads Duncan (1967, p. 243) to say further: "The study of communication becomes, then, the study of society..." Without a model which can account for the broad features of the social and economic system and the factors which govern it – such as norms, sanctions, roles, hierarchies, resources and technologies – a theory of communication is meaningless.

Thayer (1967, p. 84) says "...communication always occurs in an organized context. ... The 'rules' that define the relationship and guide the expectations of each individual provide for them a conceptual framework within which all communication relevant to the transaction must occur."

The suggestion from these accounts is that the study of communication processes must be the study of social interactions *plus* the study of the way conceptual forms serve to link ideas together. The social and conceptual processes themselves must be described and tested in order to locate a proper role for communication. Within such a conceptual framework, one should not expect communication to be an independent variable any more than one should expect the concept of norm or status to be independent in social analysis. Concepts acquire meaning (i.e., take on form), by their place and function in a social matrix which is brought into focus by addressing social problems. It is the task of social science to discover the role and place of a variable, not to assume it.

Classic theories (Schramm & Roberts, 1971) often portray communication in a way which is analogous to an electrical system with transmitters, receivers, circuits and feedback loops. The analogy is richly suggestive, but as with most analogies, it is also limiting and sometimes misleading. For one thing, investigators tend to place primary attention on senders and receivers and the links between them rather than focus on social structure and message structure. A focus on communicators and channels subsequently influences the way communication models are applied. Questions about development planning, economic growth, political stability and the like, are addressed in terms of ways to manage or manipulate the senders,

receivers and channels to assure that growth, modernization, stability or other objectives will be achieved.

A more appropriate theoretical question would be: What happens to the structure of messages in the process of their being transmitted, and does transmission not only change the quality of the ideas but the nature of the communication system itself? We do not think of electricity and electrical systems as transforming themselves through use, but that is approximately what is needed to understand human communication.

COMMUNICATION TRANSFORMS EXISTENCE

Freire (1970) characterizes the communication process as transformational, meaning communication transforms knowledge and ideas, and consequently, reality itself. Since knowledge and ideas as concepts influence how people perceive and act upon nature, communication unveils and transforms the social environment. Data about social conditions, along with a rationale about how such conditions can be controlled or changed, provide the data and forms needed to infer behavioral patterns and create new intellectual constructs which tentatively and hypothetically will lead to new conditions.

Heilbroner (1970) develops the same formulation from economic reasoning, except instead of calling it transformational, he terms it instrumentalism. The instrumental forms must actually be constructed and tried (often in imagination only) to test out whether in fact the new conditions will be achieved or missed. In the process, reality is transformed, and the process of reasoning and action must be again re-instituted in order to carry out the next activity. The same analytical procedures which have proved so useful in selecting the instruments for achieving new development conditions, can be used, in turn, for establishing and verifying the selection of new courses for action. Communication is an explanation of the process whereby the experiences of individuals are turned into conceptual materials and the store of human knowledge is expanded and transformed in the process.

Instead of making the person (sender or receiver) the unit of analysis in communication research, it would often be more appropriate to make concepts, ideas or interests the units of measure. Until this is done, it will not be possible to relate changes in knowledge and values (idea structures) to changes in social structure in determining whether

norms, sanctions or statuses have changed as a result of information transmission. An adequate study of communication and development would be one which reveals whether new social policies and institutional structures are evolving and whether these are definable in terms of operational concepts by members of the society.

The generalizations should provide an improved account of reality. As Thayer (1967, p. 83) puts it, "...a tendency to cling to untenable prototheoretical assumptions and our 'mythology' of communication, have served as significant barriers to conceptual-theoretical progress." Illich (1970) makes the same point about education and learning; we have organized the schools around postwar assumptions that teaching and learning must be programmed according to graded and standardized procedures without accounting for the consequences in terms of contemporary societies.

A broader theoretical framework for the study of communication processes based on social interactions would allow us to examine the rationale of social transformation as well as the rules and structures which govern individuals and the information itself.

Simon (1969) has done a great deal to help integrate communication concepts with thought processes and social functions. For example, the way information is processed in a social system is itself information for use in evaluating the system. Since we know there are established relationships between communication processes and social systems, information problems encountered in carrying out various programs suggest some of the points where changes can be made to correct the organizational structure. The creation or expansion of organizations changes the movement and availability of information among the various decision making participants. In all of these cases, communication both depends on the design of the system as well as influences the way it operates.

Communication as a transformational process, including rational forms which function to determine which structural transformations should be attempted and which should not, introduces the possibility of bringing judgments of policy to bear in social analyses. This is a considerable improvement over present theories which often hold policy issues outside of the system. Social data, when combined with policy data, make it possible to produce inferences about the kinds of structural transformations which will bring about development and which will not (Heilbroner, 1970, p. 185): "...each act of inference in the instrumental chain can be verified only when the desired terminus is in fact achieved or missed".

The lessons from communication research suggest that current theory will require many modifications before it can provide an adequate framework for investigating communication processes in developmental contexts. Many false starts and disappointing (even misleading) results have been produced through scores of studies about practice adoption, information seeking, two-step flow, co-orientation, empathy and the like.⁴ This paper is a start in setting forth a new broader-based theory to integrate human communication with social and intellectual phenomena and make the study of communication more useful for understanding the nature of social change and development.

NOTES

¹ The best example of this approach is McClelland (1961) who considers entrepreneurship part of the fulfillment of a drive for achievement. Schiller (1971) calls it mind management and suggests that no country has ever achieved the level of public opinion management now practiced by the United States at home and abroad. Actions described by Gelb (1971) regarding Vietnam provide strong evidence for Schiller's point.

² The large volume by Abelson et. al. (1968) provides a wide sampling of what is available as well as an appreciation for some of the frustrations in approaching communication research from a psychological perspective.

³ For a review of studies, see especially Grunig (1968) and Pye (1963). The two together give broad coverage of both economics and political science.

⁴ Rice (1971) reports, for example, how millions of dollars have been spent on devising and testing agricultural communication programs with still inconclusive results. To a large extent, the results are dismissed on the grounds that of all the things for which the money could have been spent, extension information programs were probably better than most alternatives.

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SUMMARY

CONCEPTUAL LIMITS OF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATIONS THEORY

Conventional theoretical assumptions are drawn from development communications research and are challenged on the grounds that as theoretical concepts they are inadequate guides to the selection of data and the resolution of development problems. The first conceptual fallacy results from the regular practice of choosing operational examples and analogies from the experiences of developed rather than underdeveloped countries. This is especially evident in terms of a bias favoring technology (especially U.S. technology) as a correlate to communication phenomena and as a solution to development problems. The second fallacy results from the use of inappropriate and frequently untested theoretical models within communication research causing a distorted view of the role of communication in relation to social and behavioral systems.

The first issue is argued by presenting a review of empirical studies which show that communication processes and the adoption of new technology does not go on apart from the factors which define the behavior of the social, economic and political system. Correlational analyses are of little value in explaining communication processes, or in establishing their role in relation to development.

The second issue is addressed by suggesting that communication be viewed as part of a social interaction theory in which communication is treated as a process which unveils and transforms reality in the exchange of information among persons. Communication can be defined as a process of accumulating and integrating intelligence. This reformulation shifts the research focus from questions of how communication functions to change persons (senders or receivers), to how it functions to change and transform ideas. Concepts, ideas, interests and positions can then be used as the primary units of analysis.

RÉSUMÉ

LES RELATIONS ENTRE LE DÉVELOPPEMENT ET LA COMMUNICATION (1):
LES LIMITES CONCEPTUELLES DE LA THÉORIE

Les hypothèses théoriques conventionnelles sont issues de recherches portant sur les relations entre développement et communication et sont contestées dans la mesure où elles sont inadéquates en tant que concepts théoriques, pour la sélection de données et la résolution des problèmes de développement. La première erreur conceptuelle résulte du choix habituel parmi des expériences réalisées dans les pays développés et non dans ceux en voie de développement, des exemples opérationnels et des analogies. Cette modalité constitue un biais qui favorise tout particulièrement la technologie (spécialement la technologie américaine) quant à sa place dans les processus de communication et comme solution aux problèmes de développement. La seconde erreur résulte de l'utilisation dans les recherches concernant la communication de modèles théoriques inadéquates, fréquemment non testés. Il en découle une vue erronée du rôle de la communication dans le système social et les comportements.

La première assertion est démontrée par la présentation d'une revue des études empiriques qui montre que les processus de communication et d'adoption d'une nouvelle technologie ne se produisent pas indépendamment des facteurs qui déterminent le comportement du système social, économique et politique. Les analyses de corrélation ont peu de valeur pour expliquer les processus de communication ou leur rôle dans la dynamique du développement.

La seconde affirmation est abordée en suggérant que la communication soit perçue comme partie d'une théorie de «l'interaction sociale» dans laquelle elle serait envisagée comme un processus dévoilant et transformant la réalité dans le réseau d'échanges d'informations entre agents. La communication peut être définie comme un processus d'accumulation et d'intégration de l'information. Cette reformulation déplace l'objet de la recherche; la question formulée: «comment la communication transforme-t-elle les *agents*» (émetteurs et récepteurs) devient «comment la communication en change-t-elle, transforme-t-elle les *idées*». Concepts, idées, influences et positions peuvent être désormais utilisés comme unités primaires d'analyses.

¹ au sens de = dynamique sociale, structurelle et psychologique de la transmission et de la réception d'un message.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

BEGRIFFLICHE BEGRENZUNGEN DER THEORIE
DER ENTWICKLUNGSKOMMUNIKATION

Der Artikel fasst die konventionellen theoretischen Annahmen der Forschung über Entwicklungskommunikation zusammen und kritisiert diese mit der Begründung, daß sie als theoretische Konzepte nicht adäquate Anleitungen bei der Auswahl von Daten und der Lösung von Entwicklungsproblemen sind. Der erste begriffliche Fehler kommt von der üblichen Praxis, operationale Beispiele und Analogien eher aus den Erfahrungen entwickelter Länder als aus unterentwickelten Ländern zu wählen. Das ist besonders deutlich in der Neigung, die Technologie (insbesondere die nordamerikanische Technologie) als ein Korrelat zu Kommunikationsphänomenen und als eine Lösung für Entwicklungsprobleme zu bevorzugen. Der zweite Irrtum rührt her von dem Gebrauch nicht passender und häufig unerprobter theoretischer Modelle in der Kommunikationsforschung, die eine verzerrte Vorstellung über die Rolle der Kommunikation in Beziehung zu sozialen und Verhaltenssystemen bedingen.

Der erste Aspekt wird diskutiert, indem die empirischen Studien erörtert werden, die zeigen, daß Kommunikationsprozesse und die Adoption neuer Technologie nicht getrennt von den Faktoren vor sich gehen, die das Verhalten des sozialen, ökonomischen und politischen Systems bestimmen. Korrelationsanalysen sind von geringem Wert bei der Erklärung von Kommunikationsprozessen oder bei der Feststellung ihrer Entwicklungsrolle.

Der zweite Punkt wird angegangen, indem Kommunikation als Teil einer sozialen Interaktionstheorie betrachtet wird; in dieser wird sie als ein Prozess behandelt, der die Wirklichkeit im Austausch von Information zwischen Personen enthüllt und transformiert. Kommunikation kann als ein Prozess der Sammlung und Verarbeitung von Kenntnissen und Erkenntnissen definiert werden. Diese Neuformulierung verschiebt den Brennpunkt der Forschung von Fragen, wie Kommunikation funktioniert, um Personen zu verändern (Sender oder Empfänger von Kommunikationen), zu der Frage, wie sie beim Wandel und der Transformation von Ideen wirkt. Begriffe, Ideen, Interessen und Positionen können dann als die untersten Einheiten der Analyse benutzt werden.