Chapter 1

Introduction: Communication and Social Interactions in a Technologically-Mediated World

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ABSTRACT

Epistemology is the concept used to describe ways of knowing. In other words, how you know what you know. Sociologists have been interested in how knowledge is produced since the discipline was founded in the 19th Century. How we come to know our world and make sense of it are influenced by social institutions, individual attitudes and behaviors, and our demographic position within the social order. The social order is an historical product which continues to change over time. To facilitate our learning from our socio-historical experiences, sociologists frequently turn to ideas expressed by social theorists. Social theory, whether classical or contemporary, may thus be employed to help us make sense of changes in our social and material world. Although technology is arguably as ancient as our first ancestors, as the chapters in this book reveal, the characteristics of and communications within our postindustrial society vary greatly from those which occurred in the age of modernity. This introductory chapter identifies a few well-known social theorists who have historically attempted to explain how and why social systems, at macro and micro levels, change over time. Next, it contextualizes communication as a cultural product, arguing the best way to examine the topic is from multiple, local perspectives. In the feminist tradition of postmodernist Sandra Harding, it implores us to consider the premise and source of the knowledge sources we use and espouse while communicating and interacting in specific ways and environments. Finally, grounded in the systemic backdrop of social inequality, this chapter encourages readers to begin the task of critical thinking and reflecting about how each of us, as individuals and members of local communities, nations and the world, assuage or reproduces the structurally-derived inequalities which the globalization of communication and technical systems and interacting in a global environment manifests.

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Lessons learned from 20th Century social theorists can be applied to explore how changes in epistemology have engendered social change in communication and interaction norms in our new millennium. By prioritizing the social construction of everyday social interactions, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), two well-known sociologists, challenged classical structural-functionalism, or social systems theory, particularly the ‘sociology of knowledge’ put forth by Talcott Parsons. Classical systems theory (see Parsons, 1937) articulated that a dialectical relationship exists between individuals and social systems and proposed effective social interactions resulted from successful socialization and integration of socially-approved norms, values and beliefs. In Durkheim-ian terms, the ‘social glue’ holding society together is created by the commonality of language and shared meanings of common socio-cultural ideas.

In 1967, Berger and Luckmann amalgamated tenets of grand social theory, such as the ideas put forth by Talcott Parsons, Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, with insights from existential philosophers, stemming from the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The marriage of metaphysical activity, particularly the creation of meaning from an essentially meaningless world, with sociologically-informed activities, i.e. social interactions, social systems and social institutions, highlighted the tendency for social institutions to establish normative expectations and individuals’ propensity to conform or rebel. The term ‘reification’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) was coined to describe the capacity of the social order to operate in ways that seemed supra-human, or beyond interactions and influence. When individuals encounter seemingly-outdated institutionalized practices, the opportunity for social change emerges. According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), this occurred largely through intergenerational conflict, such as when newer generations questioned the norms and values of older generations.

Applying this theoretical lens, we can see social interactions achieve much more than that which occurs during any single interaction. Social interactions not only exist as sites for communication exchange, they serve as an effective mechanism for stabilizing the existing social order and ‘flow’ of institutions and societies. In Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) terminology, our collective symbols and everyday reality legitimate our subjective experiences. Social interactions may also be sites of protest, enabling social change via the creation of new modes of thinking and behaving which challenge the status quo. Thus, the strength of this theory lies in its capacity to establish quasi-universal principles which, on the surface may appear intrinsically individualistic and focused on furthering the capacity of individual action, yet simultaneously assert the power and authority of social institutions. In brief, social interactions require communication. Communicative events, although comprised of individuals, encompass a totality which surpasses the aggregation of individuals.

Much theorizing about how communication operates within society has occurred since Berger and Luckmanns’ work. Notable is the work of Jurgen Habermas (1984-7), whichfurthers our understanding about the importance of consensus, cooperation and normative assumptions to social interactions. For Habermas (1984-7), language precedes social interaction and consensus, which structures communication, and is imbued with equity and social justice issues. To elaborate, the creation of what Habermas labels an ‘ideal speech situation’ requires social interactions to occur amongst individuals free from coercion, irrationality and other power imbalances or constraints. Habermas and other critical social theorists foreground the ability of power and authority to stifle authentic communication and demands we