

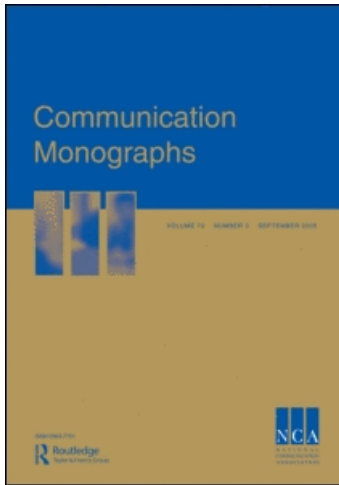
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Communication as Design

Mark Aakhus

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Design is an activity of transforming something given into something preferred through intervention and invention. An interest in design reflects a concern for creating useful things and the process of creating useful things. Design is a way to understand communication and an approach for investigating the social world from the standpoint of communication. This claim has implications for theorizing communication “problems.”

A central puzzle that people face, from a design perspective, is how to make communication possible that was once difficult, impossible or unimagined. Communication design happens when there is an intervention into some ongoing activity through the invention of techniques, devices, and procedures that aim to redesign interactivity and thus shape the possibilities for communication. The relationship between interaction and communication, which is a central problem for communication theory, is a central problem for design.

What becomes immediately apparent upon seeing communication in terms of design is the broad and deep interest in structuring, shaping, and conditioning discourse. This is evident in the varieties of designs for communication apparent in the institutions, practices, procedures, and technologies present in the built-up human world and the varieties of communication-design work performed in society apparent in the interventions people perform. Indeed, the built-up world is an ongoing engagement with the puzzle of making forms of communication possible. A crucial response to this interest is a design enterprise—that is, to open up the intentional design of communication as an object of inquiry for the purposes of advancing knowledge about communication (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005). A design enterprise treats communication as both an object and a process of design while reflectively engaging the dynamic tension between the fundamentally constitutive nature of communication and communication’s instrumental possibilities (e.g., Mokros & Aakhus, 2002).

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Aakhus and Jackson (2005) have articulated three interrelated starting points for a communication design enterprise: Design is a natural fact about communication, designs are hypotheses, and design is theoretical.

First, design is a natural fact about communication. Communication design is natural, describable activity that is evident in ordinary communicators' creativity in language use and capacity to exploit mutual knowledge and principles of interaction. Some of the most puzzling aspects of communication are what Jacobs (1994) describes as the problems of meaning (how is it that people convey and infer meaning in saying something?), action (how is it that people do things with words?), and coherence (how is it that people coherently coordinate meaning and action?). Yet, ordinary communicators routinely solve these problems through their use of language and their knowledge about language and social interaction. This knowledge is not so much a set of conventions people follow but an understanding that people employ to devise strategies and practices to engage meaning, action, and coherence in ordinary, face-to-face interaction (Jacobs, 1994).

Although some may write off language and its uses as micromatters or simply ignore it altogether, these matters provide an important basis for understanding communication design and communication's fundamental connection to the built-up human environment. The grounds for communication-design work are found in the most seemingly mundane accomplishments, such as people working out how to take turns, what footing to take up with each other, how to open and close interaction, what is relevant, what states of affairs to commit to, and so on. The grounds for designs for communication are found in the forms and patterns of language use that emerge as people interpret and encounter particular recurring puzzles of meaning, action, and coherence.

Design is evident in the way people mutually construct conversation moment-by-moment and turn-by-turn as a form of interactivity through their use of language. It is further evident in the ways people depart from ordinary conversation by constructing alternative forms of interactivity such as entertaining, disputing, negotiating, planning, informing, opposing, and so on. People construct and sustain forms of interactivity by taking on and displaying for others particular identities, performing particular actions, sequencing actions, and making particular commitments. The form of interactivity is important to working out and coordinating the unlimited possibilities for meaning, action, and coherence in any situation.

The possibilities for directing communication by varying language use are a source of creativity and contest for groups, organizations, and communities. The recognition that communication is an object of design and that interaction can become a tool for creating communication products such as entertainment, justice, contracts, plans, policies, and information. Indeed, collectives appear to organize in part to support primary forms of interactivity as each form depends on the cultivation of various skills, tools, knowledge, and other nonlinguistic resources. The court system, for instance, supports the conduct of particular types of proceedings aimed at producing justice. Alternative forms arise, such as plea-bargaining, arbitration, and mediation that address the byproducts of the system.

Communication as a design enterprise reflectively engages this continuum of creativity from the natural to the built-up by recognizing designs as hypotheses and design as theoretical.

Second, designs are hypotheses. Communication design is particularly interested in developing procedures or formats to alter forms of interactivity and thus influence communication. Where other approaches to communication focus on the behavior that occurs within a communication format, design focuses on what those formats presuppose about communication and with what consequence the new format is taken up in communicative practice (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005). The implication for communication theory and research is that “any designed object embodies a hypothesis [about communication] that may be tested by its consequences for practice” (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005, p. 414). But, where are these hypotheses?

Designs for communication present affordances that provide possibilities for interaction and constraints that remove possibilities for interaction. There are, in principle, an unlimited number of designs for communication and these designs are distinguishable by considering what an institution, practice, procedure, or technology presupposes about communication. To see this only requires a few basic comparisons. What are the differences between dispute mediation, arbitration, and court as venues for pursuing a grievance? What are the differences between brainstorming and nominal group technique as methods for generating input in solving a problem? What are the differences between organizing work in a business firm as a matrix or as an ecology? What are the differences between an e-mail listserve, a threaded discussion, and a wiki as means for supporting distributed deliberations among work teams?

Formats vary on features of interaction. Each design for communication hypothesizes how communication works and how it ought to work through its affordances and constraints.

Communication-design-work is evident in the interventions people make to realize preferred forms of interactivity and avoid nonpreferred forms. This work can be characterized in terms of the tools, ideals, and knowledge used in making specifications and predictions about communication. The range and types of communication-design work are not yet fully defined but exemplars abound. Communication-design work is an important aspect of professional practice such as in doctoring, lawyering, and managing. Consider, for example, the case of public policy professionals who possess important technical expertise about the environment, engineering, health, or law but who routinely find they make decisions about interaction as they create and implement various forms of stakeholder involvement in policy formation. Communication-design work is also the focus of practices engaged in creating useful forms of interactivity among different parties, such as the work performed by a dispute mediator, meeting facilitator, or web-services application designers.

Engaging in communication-design work does not mean the practitioner is schooled in communication theory and methods. It does mean, however, that designers hold influence over the shaping and disciplining of communication in society. People engineer many settings to manage communication, but this does not mean the engineering is reflective about the linguistic, interactional, or other matters

of communication. For a design enterprise to contribute to communication theory, it must become a reflective engagement with the hypotheses about communication in communication-design work and designs for communication.

Third, design is theoretical. What may be less apparent but of great importance for advancing knowledge about communication is recognizing how designs for communication embody theories of communication and how communication-design work is an activity of theorizing communication. The successes, failures, and surprises of designs and design work provide material for reflecting upon and theorizing communication. For instance, any design for communication has taken some evolutionary path that when articulated will tell an important story about communication. Likewise, communication work evolves as practices and concepts for practitioner conduct develop. Articulating communication design as it happens is a contribution to understanding communication in society. Engaging in communication design also advances theory.

Design is not new to communication study. Interest in communication campaigns, persuasive messages, group procedures, and improving workplace communication are just some examples of an orientation toward design. Communication research with this type of focus tends to regard itself as the application of basic research but communication design defines itself in different terms. Following Craig's (1999) ideas about communication as a practical discipline, the concern in design is not so much the application of theory to practice but with theory's consequence for practice. "We should ask not just 'How do people behave?' but 'If people understand this theory, how will they then behave?'" (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005, p. 431). A design enterprise, moreover, recognizes that theoretical concepts and principles do not translate into practical courses of action in straightforward or predictable ways. For instance, group researchers can establish the importance of criteria for group decision making but determining what criteria will work in a particular situation requires a different yet complementary kind of practical knowledge.

Design addresses these matters in the way it differs from conventional empirical research where the aim is to establish the explanatory power of a concept and from critical research where concepts derive from ideals and are used to pass normative judgments. The value of communication concepts in a design enterprise lies in how well the concepts enable the determination of a relevant intervention and invention. The value of empirical methods is in how the methods enable the designer to reflect on the situation at hand to detect surprises, flaws, and opportunities for redesign.

The most important implications of these points about design for communication research follow from the fact that design is first and foremost creative activity where "the central and distinctive commitment is to successful design, not to a particular empirical method or a particular set of concepts" (Aakhus & Jackson, 2005, p. 421). A design enterprise focuses on invention and the accumulation of practical knowledge embodied in successful and unsuccessful design and the continuous refinement of processes for design. There are two important activities to take up in a design enterprise.

First, engage in communication design. This is reflective engagement with a circumstance using communication concepts and methods to figure out how to make forms of communication possible that were once difficult, impossible, or unimagined. There are two general ways of engaging in communication design.

The principle way to engage in communication design is to create communication tools. An important example of communication design is Jackson's work on structured online dialogue protocols (Jackson, 1998, 2002). This project has developed web-based instructional support using argumentation theory to devise formats that facilitate participants' expression and management of disagreement and manage argument suppressors such as authority dependence, peer pressure, and passivity. A related example is Aakhus' work on conversations for reflection that develops tools to overcome features of interaction (e.g., the preference for agreement) that can stifle reflection in learning (Aakhus, in press). Both projects realize alternative forms of interactivity that generate new communicative possibilities and products by using communication concepts to conceptualize design, to examine the context of intervention, and to analyze outcomes for redesign.

A second way to engage in communication design is to develop design methodology. While other disciplines have actively engaged in refining design methodology, this has not been the case in communication. The challenge in communication design methodology is devising strategies that engage both the empirical and normative dimensions of communication. Jackson (1998, 2002) has worked out the components of a normatively-pragmatic design methodology: an empirical examination of discourse practices, a critical analysis based on comparison of practices with an ideal model, a specification of designable features, and a proposed redesign. Tracy's (2005) action implicative discourse analysis is a related alternative for integrating normative and empirical insights. This approach seeks to articulate normative beliefs rather than starting with a given normative model and aims to generate reflection on those beliefs and their consequences for action.

The second important activity in a design enterprise is to take a design stance in the empirical analysis of communication. The problem engaged here is to examine how forms of communication that were once difficult, impossible, or unimagined came to be. The aim is to understand how communication design happens and with what consequences. There are two general ways to take a design stance in empirical analysis.

The first way is to examine designs for communication. Such research articulates the affordances and constraints of designs for communication and then reconstructs what the design presupposes about communication. Examples include Jackson and Jacobs' research program on argumentation (Jacobs & Jackson, 2006) and analyses of Science Court, which used debate as an approach for managing expert disagreement in policy decision-making (Aakhus, 1999) and the communicative assumptions of decision-support technologies (Aakhus, 2002; de Moor & Aakhus, 2006).

Another way to take a design stance is to examine communication-design work. This research articulates the tools, ideals, and knowledge of intervention work and then reconstructs the practical theory of communication evident in the conduct of

intervention. Of particular interest is what people in a position to shape communication do to shape it and what knowledge and practices are cultivated in various professions and organizations. Some examples include analysis of meeting facilitators (Aakhus, 2001) and dispute mediators (Aakhus, 2003; Jacobs & Aakhus, 2002).

Communication problems, from a design stance, are found in the gap between normative commitments about what communication ought to be and the presumptive empirical state of affairs about what communication is. A communication design enterprise is interested in what is possible and thus it seeks out the practical and theoretical opportunities the normative–empirical gap provides for purpose of advancing communicative explanations of the social world and communication practices for engaging the social world.

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