

Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application (6th ed.)

West, R., & Turner, L. H. (2018). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill

As the title indicates, this is an introductory communication theory book. The range goes from intrapersonal communication to intercultural communication, with everything in between. This provides a broad foundation for understanding communication theory, though it also means no theory or concept can be covered in-depth.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first section defines communication and theory. This ensures before students see any communication theories, they learn how to think about communication theories. While this information is not needed to understand any single communication theory, it helps in the understanding of how the theories relate to each other and the broader world of communication.

The first chapter defines communication, including models of communication, and the second chapter documents traditions of communication (e.g., rhetorical, semiotic, and critical) and contexts of communication (e.g., interpersonal, mass media, and cultural). The third chapter, which I have found to be particularly valuable, discusses developing and evaluating theories. Beyond being used to evaluate the theories in the rest of the book, the criteria can be used to evaluate any theory. In my class, I have a theory evaluation assignment where students use those criteria to evaluate a communication theory not discussed in class. This allows them to actively engage in the theory evaluation process instead of only seeing theories evaluated.

The second section covers 27 theories in 27 chapters, which are divided into six broad classifications: the self and messages (e.g., cognitive dissonance theory and symbolic interaction theory); relationship development (e.g., social exchange theory and relational dialectics theory); groups, teams, and organizations (e.g., groupthink and organizational culture theory); the public (e.g., the rhetoric and the narrative paradigm); the media (e.g., uses and gratifications theory and agenda setting theory); and culture and diversity (e.g., muted group theory and feminist standpoint theory). The book explores a broader variety of theories than we normally use in agricultural communication. This exposes students to the broader world of communication theory, but the book does not align perfectly with current research in agricultural communication, creating the potential for disconnect between the book and our academic discipline. That said, I believe we could benefit from an expanded perspective of what agricultural communication research could be.

Consistency in the book's design is the biggest thing that helps readability. Within every chapter, the authors consistently use a few key elements to provide applications of content. Each chapter begins with a fictional story to contextualize the chapter's content. There is a *Student Voices* segment where students of the authors provide their perspectives of the theory. *Theory in Popular Press* shows chapter content through a real-world media outlet. For the 27 theory chapters, *Theory at a Glance* boils down the theory to a one-paragraph explanation. Each chapter closes with discussion questions that can be used in class or for homework. Together, this variety of applications provide multiple lenses to understand each theory, which gives students more opportunities to understand the information if they are having trouble grasping the content.

Application of Material

The book is structured for teaching, including educational tools if you want to use them. My first experience with the book was as a student, and I have continued using the book as an

instructor. The book provides a solid framework for my agricultural communication theory course. Like teaching grammar first for a writing course, the first three chapters provide a solid base for understanding theory. After that, we transition each week from one type of theory to another, usually covering three or four theories each week.

For teaching communication theory from a variety of perspectives, the book's breadth of 27 theories makes it especially valuable. The book also has enough depth to be useful for communication students without being too dense for non-communication students who might enroll in the class. This balance makes the book a happy middle ground between something like *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (2010) book that is often too dense to easily digest and Stone, Singletary, and Richmond's *Clarifying Communication Theories: A Hands-On Approach* (1999) that lacks anything resembling depth in its coverage of communication theories.

That said, the book is not ideal for all situations. If you want to teach a specific topic like mass media communication or interpersonal communication, the book's breadth becomes a hindrance. You would be better suited seeking out more narrowly focused resources. The book also has limited use for research, though the book was designed for classes, not journal articles. The early chapters have some methodological use and the chapters provide useful introductions to theories, but research papers, especially theses and dissertations, would require other references.

Conclusion

For a general agricultural communication theory course, this book's merit stems from the breadth of theories it covers and the foundations it provides to understand those theories. As an instructional tool, the variety of applications for each theory can help students learn the material more effectively and help break up the text so the book is not too monotonous. For research, the book is limited, but that is not its intended use. While the book is not inexpensive, costing more than \$100 on Amazon currently, I find the book to be worth the cost because I use every chapter during the semester. If you are looking to teach a communication theory course or considering changing textbooks, this book deserves attention.

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Stone, G., Singletary, M., & Richmond, V. P. (1999). *Clarifying Communication Theories: A Hands-On Approach*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Quisto Settle is an assistant professor of agricultural communications at Oklahoma State University. He specializes in organizational branding to help increase public and policymaker understanding of agricultural and natural resources issues.