Part 2 Preparation/Process
(Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)

Chapter **3**

Communication

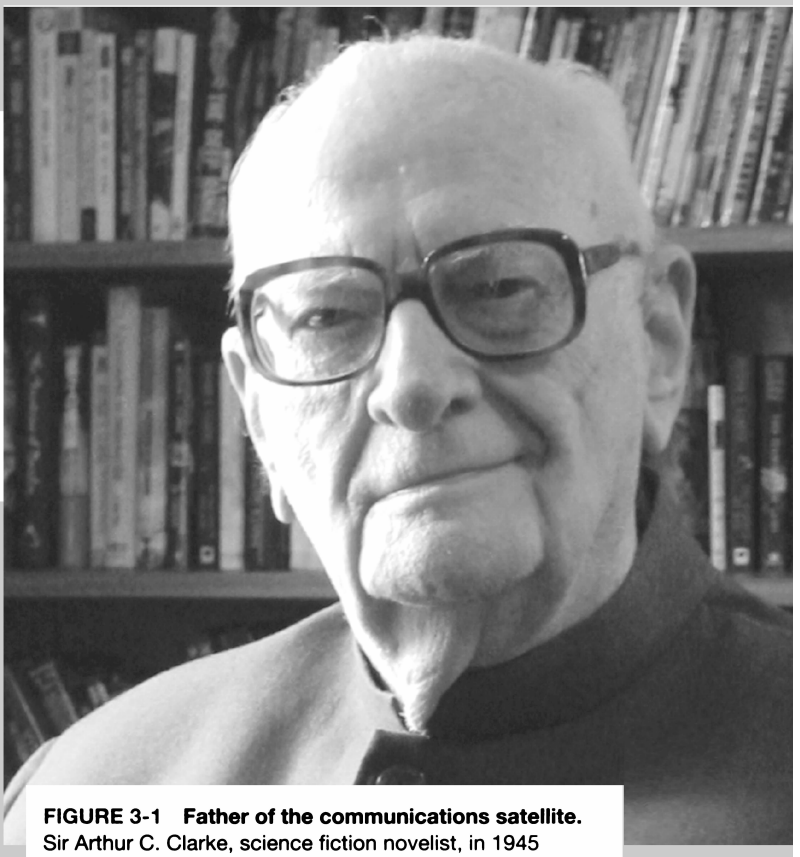

FIGURE 3-1 Father of the communications satellite. Sir Arthur C. Clarke, science fiction novelist, in 1945 envisioned the concept that today beams images around the world in real time. *(Photo: Rohan De Silva, Courtesy Arthur C. Clarke Foundation)*

Chapter Objectives

1. To discuss the goals and theories of modern communication as they relate to the practice of public relations.
2. To explore the importance and proper use of words and semantics to deliver ideas and persuade others toward one's point of view.
3. To discuss the various elements that effect communication, including the media, the bias of receivers, and the individuals or entities delivering messages.
4. To examine the necessity of feedback in evaluating communication and formulating continued communication.

Social media so dominates communications practice today that the most venerable of communication staples, the Encyclopedia Britannica, has been uprooted by an upstart online reference source called Wikipedia.

In today's online world, Wikipedia is the first source that most people—683 million visitors annually—consult. Its name is a blend of the words *wiki*, a technology for creating collaborative Websites, and *encyclopedia*. Launched in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, it is the largest, fastest-growing, and most popular general reference work on the Internet.[1]

And sometimes, that's not such a good thing. All too often, Wikipedia's "collaborators" are biased, either for or against the subject about which they are "objectively" writing. For example, in the spring of 2007, Wikipedia's founders were shocked when one of the service's most influential contributors and administrators, a chap who billed himself as "Essjay," was found not to be the tenured professor in Catholic law he had claimed but rather a 24-year-old community college dropout. That revelation—along with the knowledge that every day, scores of anonymous, self-styled "correctors" of questionable knowledge are anonymously editing Wikipedia copy—made people wonder about the accuracy of all those millions of articles in 250 languages on Wikipedia.[2] The lesson: Believe Wikipedia at your peril.

Such were the problems with communication in the age of social media.

In the 21st century, nearly the whole world is truly "wired." The power of communication, through the oral and written word and the images that flash around the world to millions of people in real time, is more awesome than any individual, group, or even nation.

What happens at a market in Baghdad is witnessed in a matter of seconds in Berlin and Bangkok and Boise. The world has truly become a "global village."

And perhaps no individual is more responsible for this global phenomenon than a British science fiction novelist who died in 2008 (Figure 3-1). Sir Arthur Clarke wrote a short article in 1945 that talked about combining the technologies of rocketry, wireless communications, and radar to envision an extraterrestrial system that relied on orbiting space stations to relay radio signals around the world.

Today, more than a half century later, Sir Arthur's vision has morphed into the global system of two dozen geo-synchronous satellites that orbit 22,300 miles above the earth, transmitting words and images around the world at the speed of light.[3] Thanks to the "Clarke Orbit" and the uplink technology that continues to be developed, events from coronations to courtroom trials to courageous efforts in the face of overwhelming tragedy are now broadcast globally at 186,000 miles per second (Figure 3-2).

As a consequence, *communication* has never been a more potent tool, and *communications* must be handled with great care.

FIGURE 3-2 The world is watching.
In the summer of 2012, as Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad slaughtered his people and thumbed his nose at the world, opposition forces in the country used the Internet to keep the world abreast of the carnage. This placard reads, "Thank you for killing us." *(Photo: JAMAL NASRALLAH/EPA/Newscom)*

Which brings us back to public relations.

First and foremost, the public relations practitioner is a professional communicator. More than anyone else in an organization, the practitioner must know how to communicate.

Fundamentally, communication is a process of exchanging information, imparting ideas, and making oneself understood by others. It also includes understanding others in return. Indeed, *understanding* is critical to the communications process. If one person sends a message to another, who disregards or misunderstands it, then communication hasn't taken place. But if the idea received is the one intended, then communication has occurred. Thus, a boss who sends subordinates dozens of emails isn't necessarily communicating with them. If the idea received is not the one intended, then the sender has done little more than convert personal thoughts to words—and there they lie.

Although all of us are endowed with some capacity for communicating, the public relations practitioner must be better at it than most. Before public relations practitioners can earn the respect of management and become trusted advisors, they must demonstrate a mastery of many communications skills—writing, speaking, listening, promoting, and counseling. Just as the comptroller is expected to be an adept accountant, and the legal counsel is expected to be an accomplished lawyer, the public relations professional must be the best communicator in the organization. Period.

Goals of Communication

When communication is planned, as it should be in public relations, every communication must have a goal, an objective, and a purpose. If not, why communicate in the first place?

What are typical communications goals?

1. **To inform.** Often the communications goal of an organization is to inform or educate a particular public. For example, before holidays, the Automobile Association of America (AAA) will release information providing advice on safe driving habits for long trips. In so doing, AAA is performing a valuable information service to the public.
2. **To persuade.** A regular goal of public relations communicators is to persuade people to take certain actions. Such persuasion needn't be overly aggressive; it can be subtle. For example, a mutual fund annual report that talks about the fund's long history of financial strength and security may provide a subtle persuasive appeal for potential investors.
3. **To motivate.** Motivation of employees to "pull for the team" is a regular organizational communications goal. For example, the hospital CEO who outlines to her managers the institution's overriding objectives in the year ahead is communicating to motivate these key employees to action.
4. **To build mutual understanding.** Often communicators have as their goal the mere attainment of understanding of a group in opposition. For example, a community group that meets with a local plant manager to express its concern

about potential pollution of the neighborhood is seeking understanding of the group's rationale and concern.

The point is that whether written release, annual report, speech, or meeting, all are valid public relations communications vehicles designed to achieve communications goals with key constituent publics. Again, the best way to achieve one's goals is through an integrated and strategically planned approach.

Traditional Theories of Communication

Books have been written on the subject of communications theory. This book is *not* one of them. Consequently, we won't attempt to provide an all-encompassing discussion on how people ensure that their messages get through to others. But in its most basic sense, communication commences with a source, who sends a message through a medium to reach a receiver, who, we hope, responds in the manner we intended.

Many theories exist—from the traditional to the contemporary—about the most effective ways for a source to send a message through a medium to elicit a positive response. Here are but a few.

- One early theory of communication, the *two-step flow theory*, stated that an organization would beam a message first to the mass media, which would then deliver that message to the great mass of readers, listeners, and viewers for their response. This theory may have given the mass media too much credit. Indeed, when media is less "mass" than it is "targeted"—through social media, Websites, blogs, cable TV, talk radio, etc.—people today are influenced by a great many factors, of which the mass media may be one but is not necessarily the dominant one.
- Another theory, the *concentric-circle theory*, developed by pollster Elmo Roper, assumed that ideas evolve gradually to the public at large, moving in concentric circles from great thinkers to great disciples to great disseminators to lesser disseminators to the politically active to the politically inert. This theory suggests that people pick up and accept ideas from leaders, whose impact on public opinion may be greater than that of the mass media. The overall study of how communication is used for direction and control is called *cybernetics*.
- The communications theories of the late Pat Jackson have earned considerable respect in the public relations field. Jackson's public relations communications models, too, emphasized "systematic investigation—setting clear strategic goals and identifying key stakeholders."[4] One communications approach to stimulate behavioral change encompassed a five-step process:
  1. **Building awareness.** Build awareness through all the standard communications mechanisms that we discuss in this book, from publicity to advertising to public speaking to word of mouth.
  2. **Developing a latent readiness.** This is the stage at which people begin to form an opinion based on such factors as knowledge, emotion, intuition, memory, and relationships.
  3. **Triggering event.** A triggering event is something—either natural or planned—that makes you want to change your behavior. Slimming down in time for beach season is an example of a natural triggering event. Staged functions, rallies, campaigns, and appearances are examples of planned triggering events.

4. **Intermediate behavior.** This is what Jackson called the "investigative" period, when an individual is determining how best to apply a desired behavior. In this stage, information about process and substance is sought.
5. **Behavioral change.** The final step is the adoption of new behavior.

- Another traditional public relations theory of communications is the basic *S-E-M-D-R communications process.* This model suggests that the communication process begins with the source (S), who issues a message (M) to a receiver (R), who then decides what action to take, if any, relative to the communication. Two additional steps, an encoding stage (E), in which the source's original message is translated and conveyed to the receiver, and a decoding stage (D), in which the receiver interprets the encoded message and takes action, complete the model. It is in these latter two stages, encoding and decoding, that the public relations function most comes into play.
- Dissonance theory, formulated in the 1950s, suggests that people seek out messages that agree with or are "consonant" to their own attitudes; they avoid messages that disagree or are "dissonant" to their own attitudes. So the fact that liberals watch MSNBC and conservatives watch Fox News is an example of such "cognitive dissonance."[5]
- There are even those who focus on the growing import of the "silent" theories of communication. The most well known of these, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *spiral of silence*, suggests that communications that work well depend on the silence and nonparticipation of a huge majority. This so-called silent majority fears becoming isolated from and therefore ostracized by most of their colleagues. Thus, they invariably choose to "vote with the majority."[6]

All of these theories and many others have great bearing on how public relations professionals perform their key role as organizational communicators.

Contemporary Theories of Communication

Many other communications theories abound today as Internet communication changes the ways and speed at which many of us receive our messages. Professor Everett Rogers talks about the unprecedented "diffusion" of the Internet as a communications vehicle that spans cultures and geographies. Others point to the new reality of "convergence" of video, data and voice, mobile and fixed, traditional and new age communications mechanisms with which public relations professionals must be familiar.

The complexity of communications in contemporary society—particularly in terms of understanding one's audience—has led scholars to author additional "audience centric" theories of how best to communicate.

- *Constructivism* suggests that knowledge is *constructed*, not transmitted. Constructivism, therefore, is concerned with the cognitive process that precedes the actual communication within a given situation rather than with the communication itself.

  This theory suggests that in communicating, it is important to have some knowledge of the receiver and his or her beliefs, predilections, and background. Simply dispensing information and expecting receivers to believe in or act on it, according to this theory, is a fool's errand. The task of the communicator, rather, is to understand and identify how receivers think about the issues in question and then work to challenge these preconceived notions and, hopefully, convert audience members into altering their views.[7]

- *Coordinated management of meaning* is a theory of communications based on social interaction. Basically, this theory posits that when we communicate—primarily through conversation—we construct our own social realities of what is going on and what kind of action is appropriate. We each have our own "stories" of life experience, which we share with others in conversation. When we interact, say the creators of this theory, we attempt to "coordinate" our own beliefs, morals, and ideas of "good" and "bad" with those of others so that a mutual outcome might occur.

  The point, again, is that communication, rather than being the simple "transmission" of ideas, is a complex, interconnected series of events, with each participant affected by the other.[8]

- Other widely discussed theoretical models of public relations communications are the *Grunig-Hunt public relations models*, formulated by Professors James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt. Grunig and Hunt proposed four models that define public relations communications.

  1. **Press agentry/publicity.** This early form of communication, say the authors, is essentially one-way communication that beams messages from a source to a receiver with the express intention of winning favorable media attention.
  2. **Public information.** This is another early form of one-way communication designed not necessarily to persuade but rather to inform. Both this and the press agentry model have been linked to the common notion of "public relations as propaganda."
  3. **Two-way asymmetric.** This is a more sophisticated two-way communication approach that allows an organization to put out its information and to receive feedback from its publics about that information. Under this model, an organization wouldn't necessarily change decisions as a result of feedback but rather would alter its responses to more effectively persuade publics to accept its position.
  4. **Two-way symmetric.** This preferred way of communicating advocates free and equal information flow between an organization and its publics, based on mutual understanding. This approach is more "balanced"—*symmetrical*—with the public relations communicator serving as a mediator between the organization and the publics.[9]

These are but a few of the prominent theories of communications—all revolving around "feedback"—of which public relations practitioners must be aware. In Chapter 4, we review relevant theories in forming public opinion.

The Word

Communication begins with words. Words are among our most personal and potent weapons. Words can soothe us, bother us, or infuriate us. They can bring us together or drive us apart. They can even cause us to kill or be killed. Words mean different things to different people, depending on their backgrounds, occupations, education, and geographic locations. As anyone who has ever walked into a Starbucks and ordered a "small" caramel mocha macchiato only to be handed a "tall" caramel mocha macchiato knows, what one word means to you might be dramatically different from what that same word means to someone else. For example, when President Obama's surrogates, in the heat of the 2012 Republican presidential nomination process, labeled eventual presidential opponent Mitt Romney as "elitist," his wealthy rival lashed back in anger, the

implication being that he couldn't relate to blue-collar voters. The study of what words really mean is called *semantics*, and the science of semantics is a peculiar one indeed.

Words are perpetually changing in our language. Every day, especially with the Internet, words are added to the lexicon. In 2012, when Marc Zuckerberg's Facebook stock floundered in its initial public offering, those who bought the stock were said to have been *Facebooked* or, worse, *Zucked*. Indeed, *Zuck* became an instant, new four-letter word.[10] What a word denotes according to the dictionary may be thoroughly dissimilar to what it connotes in its more emotional or visceral sense. Even the simplest words—*liberal*, *conservative*, *profits*, *consumer activists*—can spark semantic skyrockets. For example, in 2007, McDonald's launched a petition to get the Oxford English Dictionary to alter its definition of *McJob* as "an unstimulating low-paid job with few prospects."[11]

Particularly sensitive today is so-called discriminatory language—words that connote offensive meanings—in areas such as gender, race, ethnicity, and physical impairment. Words such as *firemen*, *manpower*, *housewife*, *cripple*, *midget*, and *Negro* may be considered offensive. While "political correctness" can go too far, it is nonetheless incumbent on public relations communicators to carefully assess words before using them.

Many times, without knowledge of the territory, the semantics of words may make no sense. Take the word *fat*. In U.S. culture and vernacular, a person who is fat is generally not associated with the apex of attractiveness. A person who is thin, on the other hand, may indeed be considered highly attractive. But along came 50 Cent and Kanye West and Jay-Z and hip-hop, and pretty soon *phat*—albeit with a new spelling—became the baddest of the bad, the coolest of the cool, the height of fetching pulchritudinousness (if you smell what I'm cookin').

Words have a significant influence on the message conveyed to the ultimate receiver. Thus the responsibility of a public relations professional, entrusted with *encoding* a client's message, is significant. Public relations encoders must understand, for example, that in today's technologically changing world, words and phrases change meaning and drop out of favor with blinding speed (see Outside the Lines in this chapter). During the past century, the English language has added an average of 900 new words every year.[12]

For an intended message to get through, then, a public relations "interpreter" must accurately understand and effectively translate the true meaning—with all its semantic complications—to the receiver.

The Message

The real importance of words, in a public relations sense, is using them to build the messages that move publics to action. Framing "key messages" lies at the top of every public relations to-do list.

Messages may be transmitted in myriad communications media: social media, speeches, newspapers, radio, television, news releases, press conferences, broadcast reports, and face-to-face meetings. Communications theorists differ on what exactly constitutes the message, but here are three of the more popular explanations.

1. **The content is the message.** According to this theory, which is far and away the most popular, the content of a communication—what it says—constitutes its message. According to this view, the real importance of a communication—the message—lies in the meaning of an article or in the intent of a speech. Neither the medium through which the message is being communicated nor the individual doing the communicating is as important as the content. This is why

Outside the Lines

Profizzle of Lexicizzle

The 21st-century lexicon of current words and phrases is ever-changing. What's *in* today is *out* tomorrow.

Doubt it?

Then translate the following phrases that your parents considered colloquial.

- *I'll be a monkey's uncle*
- *This is a fine kettle of fish*
- *Knee high to a grasshopper*
- *Going like 60*
- *Iron Curtain*
- *Domino theory*

Or explain what they meant by the following items.

- *Boob tube*
- *L.D.*
- *Segregation*
- *Mailman*
- *Stewardess*

Or reconcile what you mean with what they mean by the following terms.

- *Gay*
- *Menu*
- *Virus*
- *Crack, smack, snow,* and *blow*

Words change so quickly these days that we even have new instant languages being created before our eyes. Among them, the *gangsta* lexicon of one, Snoop Dogg (Figure 3-3), affectionately known as *izzle speak*, is designed primarily to confuse anyone who isn't an urban Black rapper. To wit:

- *Valentizzle*
- *Tonizzle*
- *Televizzle*
- *President Barack Obizzle*
- *Mitt Romnizzle*

All of which means that for public relations professionals in the 21st century, properly interpreting messages to key publics has become a complicated proposition.

Fo shizzle.

FIGURE 3-3 Profizzle of Lexicizzle.
Rapper Snoop Dogg. *(Photo: Snapper Media/Splash News/Newscom)*

professional public relations people insist on accurate and truthful content in the messages they prepare.

2. **The medium is the message.** Other communications theorists argue that the content of a communication may be less important than the medium in which the message is carried. This theory was originally proffered by the late Canadian communications professor Marshall McLuhan. This theory is relevant in today's hyper-media society, where the reputation and integrity of a particular media source may vary wildly. For example, a story carried on an Internet blog would generally carry considerably less weight than one reported in *The New York Times*. That is not to say that for some receivers, a particular blog's

credibility might surpass that of the *Times*. Personal bias, as we will discuss, is always brought to bear in assessing the power and believability of communications messages. In other words, to some cognitively dissonant citizens, conservative Fox News is the "fair-and-balanced last word" in credibility; to others, it's the liberal MSNBC.

3. **The man—or, to avoid political incorrectness, the person—is the message.** Still other theorists argue that it is neither the content nor the medium that is the message, but rather the speaker. For example, Führer Adolf Hitler was a master of persuasion. His minister of propaganda, Josef Goebbels, used to say, "Any man who thinks he can persuade, can persuade." Hitler practiced this self-fulfilling communications prophecy to the hilt. Feeding on the perceived desires of the German people, Hitler was concerned much less with the content of his remarks than with their delivery. His maniacal rantings and frantic gestures seized public sentiment and sent friendly crowds into frenzy. In every way, Hitler himself was the primary message of his communications.

   Today, in a similar vein, we often refer to a leader's charisma. Frequently, the charismatic appeal of a political leader may be more important than what that individual says. Such was the historic appeal of Fidel Castro in Cuba or Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, for example. Political orators in particular, such as former Presidents Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan, could move an audience by the very inflection of their words. The smooth and confident speaking style of Barack Obama was a major plus in his winning the presidency in 2008. Experienced speakers, from Rachel Maddow on the left to Rush Limbaugh on the right, to retired military leaders such as Colin Powell and Stanley McChrystal, to sports coaches such as John Gruden and Mike Krzyzewski, can also rally listeners with their personal charismatic demeanor.

   The point is that a speaker's words, face, body, eyes, attitude, timing, wit, presence—all form a composite that, as a whole, influences the listener. In such cases, the source of the communication becomes every bit as important as the message itself.

Receiver's Bias

Communicating a message is futile unless it helps achieve the desired goal of the communicator. As the bulk of the communications theories cited in this chapter suggest, the element of feedback is critical. This is why Web 2.0 technology—social media, interactive wikis, blogs, and the like—is important and pervasive. Key to feedback is understanding the precognitions and predilections that receivers bring to a particular message.

Stated another way, how a receiver decodes a message depends greatly on that person's perception. How an individual comprehends a message is a key to effective communications. Everyone is biased; no two people perceive a message identically. Personal biases are nurtured by many factors, including stereotypes, symbols, semantics, peer group pressures, and—especially in today's culture—the media.

Stereotypes

Everyone lives in a world of stereotypical figures. Gen Xers, policy wonks, feminists, bankers, blue-collar workers, bluebloods, PR types, and thousands of other characterizations cause people to think of specific images. Public figures, for example, are typecast regularly. The dumb blond, the bigoted right-winger, the bleeding-heart liberal,

FIGURE 3-4 Seeing stars.
Some of Hollywood's finest, courtesy of Madame Tousssaud's Wax Museum, pose below the iconic Hollywood sign. Located on Mount Lee in Griffith Park, the Hollywood sign is the most famous sign in the world. Originally built in 1923 for $21,000 as an advertising gimmick to promote home sales, the 45-foot-high, 450-foot-long, 480,000-pound sign was restored in 1978—Tinseltown's most enduring and instantly identifiable symbol. *(Photo: Jim Sulley/newscast/Newscom)*

the computer geek, and the snake oil used car salesperson are the kinds of stereotypes perpetuated by our society.

Like it or not, most of us are victims of such stereotypes. For example, research indicates that a lecture delivered by a person wearing glasses will be perceived as significantly more believable than the same lecture delivered before the same audience by the same lecturer without glasses. The stereotyped impression of people with glasses is that they are more trustworthy and more believable. (Or at least that's the way it was before Lasik surgery!)

Also, like it or not, such stereotypes influence communication.

Symbols

The clenched-fist salute, the swastika, and the thumbs-up sign all leave distinct impressions on most people. Marshaled properly, symbols can be used as effective persuasive elements (Figure 3-4). The Statue of Liberty, the Red Cross, the Star of David, and many other symbols have been used traditionally for positive persuasion. On the other hand, the symbols chosen by the terrorists of September 11, 2001—the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and most likely the U.S. Capitol and the White House—were clearly chosen because of their symbolic value as American icons.

Semantics

Public relations professionals make their living largely by knowing how to use words effectively to communicate desired meanings. Occasionally, this is tricky because the same words may hold contrasting meanings for different people. Today's contentious