

Original Paper

An Integrative Framework for International and Intercultural Communication Contexts: Conflicts, Ferment and Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract

Many scholars observe that international and intercultural communication is taking new directions in the twenty-first century, and they are reconceptualizing a range of critical topics, including cultural identity and its role in intercultural business negotiations; communication ethics and its impact on international business; and the role of mass media in disseminating information and setting issues agenda for citizens. This reconceptualization of critical communication concepts is attracting the interest of academics and researchers nations and is leading to a rethinking of the theoretical frameworks guiding communication debates and analyses. As nations are becoming interdependent and interconnected because of global market, it is important that countries involved in global markets understand one another's cultural patterns and variations in their communication differences in order to ensure continuing growth, expansion, and sustainability. Recent studies traced the slow growth of global business operations to a lack of effective communication, ineffective intercultural business communication skills, inability of entrepreneurial engagement in cross-border transactions, and incompetence in cross-cultural strategic alliance negotiations. This paper identifies and discusses various communication contexts, issues, and theoretical frameworks, and provides recommendations for effective utilization of communication tools in global and intercultural environments.

Keywords

international communication, intercultural business communication, communication theories, international business negotiation, cultural diversity and communication.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, international and intercultural communication has drawn the interests of many scholars, and theories associated with the field of communication have undergone significant and

rigorous evaluation and reconceptualization. This paper attempts to refocus on some of the unresolved issues that continue to cause debates over specific aspects of contemporary global and intercultural communication theoretical initiatives and infrastructures. Central to the ferment are certain controversial and enduring issues that have increased the ongoing agitation and have provoked strong ideological disagreements and sentiments in various communication contexts. Some of the issues of concern emerged from the beginning—the discernible origin-of international communication, e.g., control of information flow, ownership, and imbalance of information traffic around the global society. For example, issues of globalization and cultural imperialism gained international prominence in the wake of political independence of some of the developing nations as they strive to assert their sovereignties as nation-states in the rapidly changing global world.

Quite recently, a plethora of theories have been developed to enhance the understanding of the processes of international and intercultural communication in order to increase the flow of human interaction and improve organizational/societal relationships. But, like the field of international communication itself, these theories are imbued with controversies clearly driven by various ideological and philosophical orientations. Specifically, some of the theories are pro-West, such as free flow of information and modernization; others are anti-West such as dependency and structural imperialism.

As the debates and discussions focusing on the structural and functional dimensions of communication continue, it has become apparent also that issues of communication, fundamentally intercultural, are in fact at the heart of global conflicts. Furthermore, as certain enduring issues pertaining to global communication infrastructure continue to provoke strong sentiments among citizens of the South—the developing nations, issues of control, information flow, globalization, ownership, content of media messages, and now the digital divide as an outcome of innovations in telecommunication and mass communications have further complicated the flow and focus of debates and disagreements.

As it now appears, resource-rich countries of the North own, control, and operate over 80 percent of global communication infrastructure, including the old and new media systems. The North, collectively or individually, can speak to the rest of the world on a daily basis in real time through its arsenal of sophisticated communication processes and frameworks. The South lacks the capability because it either lacks the means or because the prevailing communication traffic pattern is still largely one way or linear in its directions. This phenomenon, despite the inbuilt disparities, has great potential for promoting global peace and harmony, and to some extent it does. However, because of the non-integrative nature of the system whereby it is mostly the North talking to the South, or it is the North's interpretation of global events and developments, it perpetuates perceptions of inequities and makes international communication activities exceedingly counter-productive. Constant reminders of tattered penury and deprivations of the South and, indeed, the hopelessness of the human condition in developing nations juxtaposed against the affluence of the North is bound to have some psychological

implications for the way people perceive and interact with each other as members of the global community.

2. Emergence of Theoretical Perspectives

During the late 19th century, European nations established a notion suggesting that global communication was essential for development, control, and domination of capital formation not only in their own countries but particularly around the world. Hence, in 1925, Charles Havas instituted the Havas News Bureau; in 1848, Bernard Wolff established Wolf News Agency; and in 1851, Julius Reuter established the Reuter News Agency. Meanwhile, in the United States, a number of New York newspapers gathered their resources and expertise to create the Associated Press (Cassada and Asante, 1979).

Subsequently, as its colonial interests expanded, the British laid a network of submarine cables to connect its colonies with the metropolis. Practically, the invention of the telephone, radio, television, communication, satellite, computers, the Internet, the World Wide Web, etc., became effective modes of communication and information revolution. These information resources were systematically placed within the context of European and American foresight of the inevitable connectedness of control of communication in the global market economy, which resulted ultimately in a strong dominance of global politics and economic systems.

Consequently, Western nations have dominated and continue to control structural and functional processes of communication innovation. This disparity cannot be dismissed easily because it is part of the core of the political and other social struggles for social and political change around the world today. Hence, global peace and harmony may remain far-fetched without a rethinking of the non-integrative nature of global communication toward a redistribution of innovation in communication to enhance human interactions and mutual understanding among the citizens of the world.

3. Communication, Terrorism, and Individual Freedoms

Since the incident of 9/11, everyone in the world today has become a potential terrorist, and those who may find this hard to believe only need to attempt to travel by air locally or internationally. Even well-known United States prominent people and global leaders have not been immune to this new attitude about terrorism. From time to time, government officials have been stopped at American and other international airports for extra security screening and/or interrogation. In many ways, those who commit terrorist acts have succeeded in defining or redefining the psyche and ethos of whole communities of people both in terms of individual freedoms-the right to free expression of ideas without fear of reprisal, the right to associate with others, and the right to choose one's religion, affiliation/association, or movement. As a result, natural identities of race and ethnicity face serious challenges.

It was recently announced, for example, that data about passengers flying between European Union

countries and the United States would be gathered and shared among these countries as part of the new global security dispensation. As Washington Post noted, “the United States and the European Union have agreed to expand a security program that shares personal data about millions of U.S.-bound airline passengers a year, potentially including information about a person’s race, ethnicity, and religion and health” (p.A1). In addition, data about people’s racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, health, traveling partners and sexual orientation have come under this new regulation. Indeed, modern society is thus left with the precarious dilemma that to successfully combat global terrorism, curtailment of individual freedoms and communication is inevitably part of the price or consequence facing global citizens.

4. Intercultural Communication and Global Values

As today’s marketplace becomes increasingly global, modern businesses demand that people travel to overseas, communicate effectively with foreign partners, colleagues, and customers in efforts to take advantage of the opportunities of a culturally diverse marketplace environment. Chaney and Martin (2007) emphasize that many corporations are beginning to have a global mindset by sourcing, producing, importing, or exporting their products. As a result, addressing the full complexity of intercultural communication has gained substantial importance in the international business arena. Importantly, international business etiquette (the expected rules of behavior and professional conduct for communicating across cultures) has become progressively more demanding and complex. In fact, Bovee and Thill (2010) stress that learning the essential skills to communicate proper etiquette on an international level is one of the critical elements for business practices and negotiation. The authors note that some behavioral rules are formal and specifically articulated, while others are informal and learned over time, thus influencing the overall behavior and conduct of people in today’s interconnected world. Therefore, multinational corporations should begin to appreciate, respect, and value cultural and communication differences and develop a better understanding of why people act or behave in certain ways in the conduct of business transactions as well as their social relationships. Similarly, O’Rourke (2010) identified the most common factor contributing to failure in international business assignments as the inability to acculturate to foreign ways of thinking and acting as opposed to merely emphasizing technical or professional competence. As the need for participation in the global marketplace flourishes, managers are required to improve their communicative competence and intercultural relationships. Bovee and Thill (2010) maintain that supervisors should be equipped with skills for coping with the expected behaviors of diverse employees, especially their communication variations. Additionally, multi-national teams face the challenge of working together and communicating with one another and business-persons are challenged to learn the effective communication skills for negotiating with international business partners. Thus, learning and acquiring interpersonal and group communication skills have become a major requirement for positioning

international businesses for competitive advantage.

The role of effective communication in business and political contexts is now widely recognized as a strategic factor toward global business expansion and growth. Carte & Fox (2008) noted that one of the major challenges in international business operations is the failure to anticipate and understand intercultural differences, and the ability to adapt to cross-cultural communication situations. The ability to acquire international business etiquette, communicate cross-culturally, and adapt to new environments is the foundation for successful competition in multinational business. Other studies (Budhwar 2001; Cardon & Fox, 2003) contend that competitive advantage in multinational or global business engagement hedges largely on how well managers conduct their official transactions in foreign cultures. It is equally important that consistent efforts are made to train and acculturate corporate representatives on essential nonverbal and verbal skills for foreign settings as well as the interpersonal competence for participating effectively and productively in formal and informal meetings and negotiations.

5. Poverty, Communication, and Global Conflict

Researchers across disciplines (Brett, 2001; Chaney & Martin, 2007; O'Rourke, 2010) are consistent in their views that communication is an invaluable catalyst in almost every aspect of human development. For basic human survival as well as for organizational effectiveness, communication is an inevitable process especially in intercultural and international contexts. It is invaluable for human coexistence and relationships and for a peaceful co-habitation with neighbors as well as with citizens of other races and cultures. Theoretically and practically, every communication tool necessary for the elimination of misery, poverty, and the causes of mutual distrust and suspicion in contemporary societies are now at the disposal of this generation.

In many parts of the world, especially in developing nations, human condition remains deplorable because of collective failure and lack of meaningful commitment to improving the lives of people through knowledge generation and knowledge/education diffusion. In other words, modern societies are yet to utilize communication tools to fully improve the quality of human experience and relationship with others. As long as human misery remains at its present levels, global harmony and all forms of exchange will remain illusive. Brainard and Chollet (2007), drawing from ongoing research and conversations about global issues, have not only confirmed the connection between global poverty and conflict, but have suggested that some people may now be "too poor for peace" as long as they are not free to communicate among themselves, enjoy open expressions, and uninformed about issues that affect their lives.

The effort to end poverty is about much more than extending a helping hand to those in need. In a world where boundaries and borders have blurred, and where seemingly distant threats can metastasize into immediate problems, the fight against global poverty has become a fight of necessity-not simply

because personal morality demands it, but because global security demands it (Brainard & Chollet, 2007). Given the unbridled growth in communications technology, the amazing ingenuity and creativity in the application of communication resources in other areas, it is difficult to understand why resources have not been fully applied to improve human conditions. That human problems remain unresolved are indications of failure of both society and humanity, and not necessarily the failure of the victims of these problems. There is absolutely no justifiable reason for poverty in contemporary society, if the available political, social, cultural and economic resources are appropriately applied toward alleviating human misery and improving the quality of life.

6. Media Content, Quality of Messages, and Media Impact

Communication scholars and theorists explained that the nature of messages produced and disseminated in the media systems are reflective of issues and problems existing in societies at large. Further, media sociologists identified a multitude of factors that influence media content. These include the prevailing political processes within nations and around the world, global news infrastructure, and people who work within these systems. Different social and political structures encourage various types of media systems – whether in terms of the way the mass media are operated or in terms of their ownership and control. In some countries, mass communication systems are owned and operated by the government, others encourage private ownership, or a combination of both to varying degrees. Corollary to the social and political systems are the laws of libel and slander and other laws pertaining to the media which also vary from society to society. All of these are factors that define mass media content within national or international contexts.

At the international level, of all the news infrastructures influencing media content, American Cable news Network (CNN) has become the primary mirror of the world because of its consistent 24-hour news service. But, the reflections in the mirror are considered by many as distorted images of reality. Take for instance, CNN report on the beleaguered Niger Delta of Nigeria that was aired on February 10, 2007, which reported by correspondent Jeff Koinanage. The reporter and his camera crew went to the region on the invitation of “Jomo”, an alleged leader of the Group Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Upon arrival, he shot unique footages of the group with more than a dozen captive oil workers held by the group as hostages. The program was repeatedly aired on CNN and beamed across the world. Quite naturally, Nigerian officials who claimed that the program was one-sided were infuriated and responded angrily with a barrage of condemnation of CNN and its alleged sinister plans to portray the country in a negative light.

7. News as Commodity for Dissemination

The international media system is an economic structure in which the news production process is like a manufacturing industry. In this analogy, the news story represents a commodity and the factors

influencing its production are the allocation of resources, economic pressures on the production process, and the necessity to produce a saleable commodity (Harris, 1976). Additionally, there are cultural factors which combined with the economic reality clearly define the nature of media messages. One researcher noted that news is a daily negotiation among various actors occupying different niches in the information ecosystem: political actors seek to control news content, journalists operate simultaneously within a profession dedicated to informing citizens and businesses that sell products to audiences, and citizens/audiences who are members of a culture for whom the news must ring true with what they believe about themselves as a people (W. Lance Benet, 1997).

8. Agenda-Setting Paradigm: A Theoretical Framework

An extensive review of the literature was undertaken in search of a theoretical framework that would shed more light on the role of the mass media and communication in national and international development issues and contexts. The search resulted in the conception and utilization of a theoretical perspective which not only bears great relevance to this scholarly paper, but also provides an epistemological foundation for the analysis of media effect studies as well as other communication-related contexts.

The agenda-setting theoretical perspective is fundamentally concerned with the ability of communication media to influence and structure the level of public awareness and sensitivity as well as salience of issues in the public domain. Through constructed and constricted framework, the communication media employs a mechanism of perpetuating values and perspectives within which members of the public perceive social reality. Historically, the agenda-setting theory was first introduced and analyzed by Lippmann (1922), subsequently by Cohen (1963), Lang and Lang (1981), and was tested empirically by McCombs and Shaw (1972) in political and development communication settings. This theory is critically significant because it indicates how communication fosters and shapes public perception of issues and consequently transforms people's attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, in the quest for economic, social, and political development, the agenda-setting theoretical perspective is widely acknowledged for being instrumental to achieving various development objectives by generating public interests and consciousness, creating and emphasizing the basis for need, projecting salient issues, and inducing positive human participation and engagement. The ability of mass media to set public agenda is a significant measure of sustainable modern democratic governance in developed and developing nations.

9. Conclusion

In the global community, a myriad of complex social, political, and economic factors are the sources of the ferment in international communication. It is quite interesting to note that conflict among people within nations and in the global community as a whole is always imminent, but the prospects for peace

and harmony through the creative use of contemporary global communication infrastructure are much greater today than ever before. For this to happen, it will require an agenda for a broader dissemination of information resources as a way of encouraging participation and exchange among global citizens.

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