



CHAPTER 1

What Is Organizational Communication?

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Humans are organizational animals; modern life is defined by organizations and corporations.

“Everything communicates.”

—Sergio Zyman, former Chief Marketing Officer, Coca-Cola.

We are organizational beings. We go to work, attend college and church, do volunteer work, join social groups, shop at numerous stores, internalize thousands of commercials from large corporations, and participate in social media. Human beings are communicating, organizing creatures, and we define ourselves largely through our various organizational memberships and communicative connections.

As simple as this assertion is, it hides a rather complex reality. The organizations that define who we are—and our relationships to them—have become increasingly complicated. Indeed, as systems of communication, we largely take for granted organizations and their roles in our lives. In a 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College titled “What is Water?,” the late author David Foster Wallace told the following story: Two young fish are swimming along and run into an older fish, who nods at them in passing and says, “Mornin’,

boys. How's the water?" The two young fish swim along for a while until one turns to the other and says, "What the hell is water?" In many ways our relationships to organizations and the communication processes that create them is a bit like a fish's relation to water—they are essential to our self-definition and sense of being-in-the-world, but we navigate them without really paying much attention to how they give meaning to our lives.

One purpose of this book, then, is to provide you with a map to navigate the water we all swim in and to figure out the complexities of organizational communication processes. This map is important because in the last 30 years the influence of organizations and corporations in our lives has increased considerably. Indeed, some have argued that corporations in particular have become more powerful and influential than governments. With the advent in the 1980s of an economic and political system called neoliberalism and an organizational form called post-Fordism (both of which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 6), corporations significantly expanded their spheres of influence such that work and consumption increasingly define people's lives. As the quotation from former CEO of Coca-Cola Sergio Zyman at the beginning of the chapter indicates, corporations have understood for a long time that much of that influence depends on the sophisticated use of communication processes to shape the world we live in. "Everything communicates" is not just a lame slogan that every communication major hears in her or his first introductory course. Rather, it reflects corporations' recognition that, especially in the 21st century, communication is their lifeblood. Moreover, they recognize that their ability to shape meaning and social reality through communication processes is fundamental to their continued success. Thus, if corporations take communication seriously as a complex process, then as students of organizational communication we must take it just as seriously and explore how organizations and corporations function as complex communication phenomena.

Given the power and influence of organizations in contemporary society, it is important to understand organizational communication as a process that is inescapably linked to the exercise of power. As we will argue throughout this book, power is a defining feature of everyday organizational life, and an issue with which all perspectives on organizational communication must grapple. Indeed, so fundamental is power to our understanding of how organizations function that management researchers Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson, and Nelson Phillips (2006) claim, "Power is to organizations as oxygen is to breathing" (p. 3). What does it mean to make this claim, and what are its implications for how we live our lives as organizational beings?

First, let's briefly discuss how the modern organization developed. The emergence of capitalism as the dominant economic system in the late 18th century required work to be organized in a quite different manner than in precapitalist systems. In the next section, we address the emergence of this new organization that transformed both work and society.

TIME, SPACE, AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN ORGANIZATION

The idea of working for an organization and earning a wage is an idea of fairly recent invention. Indeed, early capitalism had a great deal of difficulty persuading people that

regular employment was a good thing, with resistance to this idea extending well into the 20th century. In one sense, then, “The history of capitalism is a history involving the gradual reconciliation of individuals with the sacrifices of the working day” (Frayne, 2015, p. 29). As late as the middle of the 19th century, working for an employer rather than for oneself was called “wage slavery.” For the average U.S. citizen, such a notion directly contradicted the principles of freedom and independence on which the United States was established. In fact, in the early 19th century around 80% of U.S. citizens were self-employed; by 1970, this number had decreased to a mere 10% (Braverman, 1974). To be described as an “employee”—a term that came into widespread use only in the late 19th century and was originally used exclusively to describe railroad workers—was definitely not a compliment. As management scholar Roy Jacques (1996) argues, “Before the late nineteenth century in the U.S., there were workers, but the employee did not exist” (p. 68).

This shift from a society consisting of “workers” to one consisting of “managers” and “employees” is key to understanding the historical transformations that led to the emergence of an “organizational society.” This shift involves both a change in the kinds of jobs people held and a more fundamental transformation of collective beliefs, values, and cultural practices involved in the transformation from an agrarian to an industrial society. Moreover, a change occurred in the forms of discipline and control to which people were willing to consent. In Foucault’s (1979a) terms, the employee as a particular “subject” (i.e., an object of scrutiny about whom knowledge is produced) was created as a definable and measurable entity. Similarly, managers as an identifiable social group were also created to administer and control the newly emergent employee. To understand our origins as corporate or organizational beings, we will explore the elements of this creation process.

The transformation from an agriculturally based, agrarian society (in which most people worked for themselves to produce goods for self-consumption) to an industrial society required workers who embodied different work habits. The development of these new work habits can be traced in good part to the emergence of a new understanding and measurement of time. British historian E. P. Thompson (1967) identifies the shift from task time to clock time as being a defining feature in the emergence of industrial capitalism. **Task time** refers to an organic sense of time where work is shaped by the demands of the tasks to be performed. For example, the lives of the people living and working in a seaport are shaped by the ebb and flow of the tides, regardless of the “objective” clock time. Life in a farming community is shaped by the seasons; working long hours in the harvest season contrasts with the more limited amount of labor in the winter months. Similarly, the lives of independent craftspeople and artisans are oriented around the tasks they perform and are not dictated by the hands of the clock.

Thompson (1967) shows how in preindustrial Britain little of life was subject to routine, with work involving “alternate bouts of intense labour and of idleness” (p. 73). For the most part, people worked when they needed to and thought nothing of mixing leisure with labor. Thompson argues that this task orientation toward time is more humanly comprehensible than labor dictated by the clock and represents a lack of demarcation between work and life in general. From the perspective of clock time, however, such an orientation toward work appears wasteful.

In the struggle between employers and employees in early industrial capitalism, time proved to be *the* significant point of contention. As more and more people shifted from

self-employment to working for others, employers attempted to impose a new sense of time—**clock time**—that was alien to most workers but essential to the development of systematic and synchronized forms of mass production. As such, under the employer–employee industrial relationship, time was transformed from something that was passed to something that was spent—time became *a form of currency*. In this new relationship, it is not the task that is dominant but the value of the time for which the employer is paying the worker.

However, the introduction of clock time into the workplace marked a period of considerable struggle between employers and employees, in which the former attempted to erode the old customs and habits of preindustrial life rooted in task time. For example, in the late 1700s pottery factory owner Josiah Wedgwood was the first employer to introduce a system of “clocking in” for workers (Thompson, 1967, p. 83), dictating the precise time that employees started and finished work. In addition, early industrialists recognized that schooling could socialize future workers into the discipline of industrial time. Thus, a number of late 18th-century social commentators viewed education as “training in the habit of industry,” referring not to specific skills but to the discipline required for industrial work (Thompson, 1967, p. 84).

The introduction of clock time, then, was not only crucial for the development of mass-production techniques but also as a means of controlling a workforce for whom independent work was the norm. As Thompson (1967, p. 80) points out, the shift to clock time was not simply a technological advancement, but more significantly, it made possible the systematic exploitation of labor. Once time became a commodity—something that was paid for in purchasing labor power—then employers used all possible means to extract as much labor as possible from their workers. In fact, much of the workplace conflict in the 19th and early 20th centuries revolved around the length of the working day, with workers’ unions playing a significant role in reducing the number of hours employees were required to work. Indeed, in the struggle to reduce the length of the working day, a common late 19th-century labor union slogan was “Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, and eight hours for what we will.” Nevertheless, the basic principle that workers could be required by employers to work a certain number of hours was accepted relatively early in the Industrial Revolution.

Even today, clock time is still the defining feature of work for many people. An employee’s level of power and prestige is at least partly reflected by how independent he or she is from the clock. Generally speaking, the more one is considered a professional, the less one is tied to clock time and the more one is invested in the nature of the tasks one performs (Ciulla, 2000). For example, as university professors, we have a considerable amount of discretion over how we organize our time. As long as we fulfill our professional obligations (teaching, advising, committee work, research, etc.), how and where we spend that time is entirely up to us. We don’t have to clock in when we come to work or clock out when we leave. On the other hand, for an assembly line or fast-food worker, the clock and speed of the “assembly line” dictate the entire working day. Such a worker has little or no control over how his or her time is spent.

In the first part of this chapter, we have been establishing the historical context for the emergence of the modern organizational form. As we can see, the issue of control figures

prominently, as factory owners increasingly tried to dictate employees' relationship to work. In order for organizations to function as collective, coordinated, goal-oriented social structures, fundamental shifts had to occur in the experience and meaning of work. While it took a number of decades, the average worker was disciplined to internalize the idea of working for someone else in a synchronized, coordinated manner for a specified time period. However, this transition from task time to clock time and from agrarian to industrial work was by no means smooth. Indeed, workers who in precapitalist times were used to a good deal of autonomy and independence in terms of how they worked did not take easily to the new regimes of control imposed by the industrial organization. In the next section, then, we will explore how the modern organization developed strategies and structures for managing the autonomy of its workers. Thus, we will examine organizations as communicative structures of power.

ORGANIZATIONS AS COMMUNICATIVE STRUCTURES OF POWER

Beginning in the late 19th century, as industrial capitalism became the dominant economic system, the new corporate organization and its employees became a focal point of study for social scientists in various academic fields. In the 150 years since then, researchers have developed various theories to explain how people can be motivated to come together to perform specific tasks when, more often than not, they would rather be somewhere else doing something different. Such has been the centrality of this problem for social scientists that sociologist Charles Perrow (1986) has claimed, "The problems advanced by social scientists have been primarily the problems of human relations in an authoritarian setting" (p. 53). For Perrow, the primary "authoritarian setting" is the workplace.

This problem of human relations in organizations is a complex one, as we will see in the course of this book. One of the defining features of an organization is that it coordinates the behaviors of its members so that they can work collectively. But while coordination is a nice concept in theory, it is surprisingly complicated to achieve in practice. Particularly in for-profit organizations (where most people work), one of the principal factors that limits such coordination is the tension between a human desire for autonomy and agency on the one hand, and organizational efforts to shape the will of employees to serve its goals on the other. Philosopher of work Joanne Ciulla (2000) nicely expresses this tension when she states, "The struggle for freedom and power or control has long been the struggle between masters and slaves, lords and serfs, and employers and employees. It is the central problem of work" (p. 70). Table 1.1 below summarizes some of the ways in which, in the modern workplace, this tension between employee autonomy and organizational control is manifested.

As the table suggests, there is an inherent tension between an employee's desire to maximize her or his salary and a company's desire to minimize costs and maintain profitability. The proliferation of companies that outsource many of their manufacturing jobs to other countries that provide cheaper labor is testament to this fact. Similarly, most workers would prefer job stability and be able to rely on a consistent paycheck, but this stability goes against the trend over the last 30 years of companies maintaining flexibility

Table 1.1 Some Tensions Between Employee Autonomy and Organizational Control

Employee Goals		Organizational Goals
Maximizing salary	←-----→	Minimizing costs
Job stability	←-----→	Organizational flexibility and change
Maximizing leisure time	←-----→	Maximizing work time
Behaving spontaneously	←-----→	Behaving predictably
Asserting individual values	←-----→	Asserting collective values
Developing personal relationships	←-----→	Developing professional relationships
Creativity	←-----→	Efficiency
Relaxing the labor process	←-----→	Intensifying the labor process

by re-engineering, getting rid of nonessential jobs (e.g., outsourcing janitorial work), and focusing on core competencies (Weil, 2014). Thus, job instability has become the order of the day for millions of workers.

Of course, not all of these tensions exist in simple opposition to each other. For example, while organizations largely function as rational systems, employee expression of emotions at work is hardly taboo; if you have ever worked in retail, you know that providing customers with a positive experience involves expressions of warmth, positivity, and happiness. However, employee emotional expression is usually carefully prescribed by organizations in order to meet their goals (a phenomenon called emotional labor, which we will discuss in Chapter 7). In this sense, then, the tension derives from the ways in which a natural human trait (emotional expression) is co-opted by the organization to increase profits. In other words, human emotions are rationalized (i.e., made to serve the instrumental and efficiency goals of the organization) in ways that may not be comfortable for the employee (as anyone will attest who is required to smile throughout an 8-hour shift, regardless of how customers treat him or her).

Our point here is that these tensions have to be resolved in some way and that, generally speaking, they are resolved in ways that are consistent with organizational rather than individual goals. Telephone company executive Chester Barnard (1938) was among the first to argue that organizations are successful to the extent that they can subordinate the goals and beliefs of individual organization members to those of the larger organization. All organizational and management theories thus implicitly pose the question “How do we get organization members to behave in ways that they may not spontaneously engage in and that may even be against their best interests?” In many ways, the history of management thought is the history of efforts to develop more and more sophisticated answers to this question.

However, organization members do not passively accept these various efforts to control their behavior. On the contrary, the history of management thought is also

a history of struggle, as employees have individually and collectively resisted management efforts to limit their autonomy in the workplace (Fleming, 2014a; Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017; Paulsen, 2014). These forms of resistance run the gamut from striking, sit-ins, and sabotage (called Luddism in the 19th century), to more creative acts of resistance. In the early days of industrial capitalism, for example, workers fought for safer working conditions and an 8-hour workday by striking and picketing. In more recent times, corporate efforts to engineer organizational culture and instill certain values in employees are sometimes hijacked by employees for their own ends, or else employees create their own countercultures in the organization, rejecting the values communicated by management (e.g., Ezzamel, Willmott, & Worthington, 2001; R. Smith & Eisenberg, 1987). Thus, it is important to think about power as a dynamic process of struggle that rests on a complex relationship between control and resistance. That is, organizational control is never a simple cause-effect phenomenon (like one billiard ball hitting another); it often produces creative employee responses that produce unintended outcomes for the organization. Thus, when we describe organizations as communicative structures of power, we are talking about how the tensions between employee autonomy and organizational control efforts play out dynamically through various communication processes.

Before we can examine these different organization theories through the lens of power, however, we need to develop a coherent and clear notion of what organizational communication means. Let's address this below.

DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

In this section, we'll explore what it means to talk about organizational communication. W. Charles Redding (1988)—widely regarded as the founder of the field of organizational communication—argues that all complex organizations (i.e., social structures large enough to make face-to-face communication among all members impossible at all times) exhibit the following four essential features: (1) interdependence, (2) differentiation of tasks and functions, (3) goal orientation, and (4) control. Oddly, he did not include communication as a defining feature of organizations. However, we will examine that feature via a fifth element: the communication–organization relationship. Let's examine each of these elements in turn, beginning with the communication–organization relationship.

The Communication–Organization Relationship

One of the problems in defining the term *organizational communication* is that we are dealing with two phenomena—*organization* and *communication*—that are individually extremely complex. While there are a number of different ways to think about the organization–communication relationship (R. Smith, 1992), two have been particularly influential in the history of organizational communication: (1) The “communication in organizations” perspective, and (2) the “organizations as communication” perspective. Let's discuss these two perspectives below.

Communication in Organizations

This perspective views organizations as relatively stable, physical structures within which communication occurs. In this sense, organizations are containers for communication processes, and people send information to each other from their various positions in the organization. In many respects, this has been the dominant model of organizational communication for much of the history of the field. Its approach is largely technical, focusing on questions of efficiency and clarity. Some of the main questions at issue here are as follows: (1) How can communication be made more accurate? (2) How do communication breakdowns occur? (3) How can we make sure that the message sent is the message that is received? and (4) What is the most appropriate medium through which to send messages? Here, issues related to noise (factors that distort message reception), channel (the medium of communication) information content (what is new in the message?), and redundancy (repetitive elements that increase the possibility of accurate message reception) are seen as key factors to take into account when thinking about effective organizational communication. In this approach, we can think about the communication–organization relationship as one in which communication occurs *in* organizations.

This perspective on the organization–communication relationship has its place, especially if one is primarily interested in questions of clarity and accuracy, but it also has serious limitations. First, by treating communication simply as an information transmission process within an already established organizational structure, it tends to downplay the significance of communication in the optimal performance of organizations. Communication becomes one organizational variable among many, and thus is easy to overlook. Indeed, management scholar Stephen Axley (1984) has argued that the information transfer model (what he calls the “conduit” model of communication) is fairly dominant among managers, leading them to think of good communication as relatively easy to accomplish and thus not deserving of much attention or adequate resources.

Second, it overlooks the complexity of the communication process. The reality is that communication is not just a means for transferring information from one person or location to another; rather, it is the process through which we create meaning. When we think of communication merely as information transfer, we are unable to recognize and take into account the complexity and ambiguity that is inherent in communication as a meaning creation process. If we are to be good communicators (as organization members or otherwise), we need to be able to appreciate the multiple meanings that can be present in any communication context.

Third, we have a sense of who we are, our connections to others, and our place in the world because we are communicating beings. When Sergio Zyman says that “everything communicates,” he is acknowledging the fundamentally symbolic nature of reality; that is, everything—words, stories, the shape of a building, or even a rainy day—has the potential to be meaningful to us (and meaningful in potentially multiple ways). Finally, this information transmission view of communication is a problem because it tends to treat organizations as given. When we think of organizational communication as the process of communicating in organizations, then the organizations themselves tend to be taken for granted. They become relatively fixed, unproblematic structures that exist independently from the communication process that occurs within them. A useful video titled

“What Is Organizational Communication?” (produced by organizational communication scholar Matt Koschmann, 2012) that critiques this “container” view of the organization–communication relationship is available on YouTube.

Organizations as Communication

The second perspective, and the one that we will adopt throughout this book, has a much more “muscular” conception of communication in framing the organization–communication relationship. This perspective argues that communication constitutes organization—an idea referred to by some organizational communication scholars as the CCO approach to organizations (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, 2000; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Put simply, this means that communication activities are the basic, defining “stuff” of organizational life. Without communication, organizations cease to exist as meaningful human collectives. In this sense, organizations are not simply physical containers within which people communicate; rather, organizations exist because people communicatively create the complex systems of meaning that we call organizations. From this perspective, communication is more than simply one factor among many of organizational life; rather, organizations are seen as fundamentally communicative phenomena.

A useful way of thinking about organizations from this perspective is to view them as complex patterns of communication habits. Just as individuals develop habitual, routine behaviors that enable them to negotiate daily life, so large groups of people develop patterns of communication behavior that enable coordination and collective, goal-oriented activity. A meeting, for example, is a communication phenomenon that is meaningful and significant precisely because it is structured around rules for what counts as a meeting and features more formal and ritualized communication patterns regarding things such as turn taking, decision making, and so forth, all of which differentiate it from a casual hallway conversation.

Although there are multiple definitions and conceptions of communication, in this book we will adopt a meaning-centered perspective, viewing communication as the basic, constitutive process through which people come to experience and make sense of the world in which they live. In other words, communication does not just describe an already existing reality but actually *creates* people’s social reality. For example, organization members who talk about themselves as a “family” create a quite different social reality from that of an organization where a “machine” metaphor is dominant and organization members see themselves simply as cogs in that machine (R. Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

From such a perspective, we can define **communication** as follows: *the dynamic, ongoing process of creating and negotiating meanings through interactional symbolic (verbal and nonverbal) practices, including conversation, metaphors, rituals, stories, dress, and space.* As we will see in later chapters, this definition is not accepted by all theories of organizational communication. However, it provides a useful benchmark against which we can examine and critique other perspectives.

Following from the above definition of communication, we can define **organizational communication** in the following way: *the process of creating and negotiating collective, coordinated systems of meaning through symbolic practices oriented toward the achievement of organizational goals.* This definition moves away from the idea of organizations as

objective structures within which people communicate and emphasizes the notion that organizations are, in many respects, nothing but the collective communication behaviors of their members. Of course, these collective communication behaviors do not just occur arbitrarily and spontaneously, but are rather coordinated in particular ways. Organizations are, after all, complex entities, often with hundreds or thousands of employees (so we also shouldn't assume that those collective, coordinated systems of meaning are fully shared by all members). So, let's unpack this definition of organizational communication further by examining the other defining features of organizations.

Interdependence

Organizations exhibit interdependence insofar as no member can function without affecting, and being affected by, other organization members. All complex organizations consist of intricate webs of interconnected communication activities, the integration of which determines the success or failure of the organization. Universities, for example, consist of complex webs of students, faculty, departments, schools, staff, and administrators, each group shaping and being shaped by all the others. While students may seem to be the group with the least agency (i.e., ability to influence others), they nevertheless heavily shape the behavior of the other groups (e.g., by making courses popular or unpopular through enrollment), especially given their role as the primary "customers" of universities (McMillan & Cheney, 1996).

As organizations have become increasingly complex and global in the past 20 or 30 years, interdependence has become an even more significant and defining feature of organizational life. Many large organizations depend on a complicated array of subsidiaries, outsourcing processes, communication technologies, and leveraged financial structures in order to flourish. Any change in one aspect of this complex system of interdependence can create changes in the entire system. For example, disruption of microchip production in South Korea (where 50% of the world's microchips are made), could lead to delays in the launch of the latest iPhone.

Differentiation of Tasks and Functions

All organizations, however large or small, operate according to the principle of division of labor, in which members specialize in particular tasks and the organization as a whole is divided into various departments. As the 18th century economist Adam Smith illustrated through his description of pin manufacture, many more pins can be produced when the manufacturing process is divided into many specialized tasks than if all the tasks are performed by a single individual (A. Smith, 1776/1937). This feature of organizations truly came into its own in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the introduction of two complementary systems for organizing work: scientific management (developed by Fredrick Taylor) and bureaucracy (developed as a universal set of organizing principles by German sociologist Max Weber). We will discuss these two developments in Chapter 3, but together they had a profound effect on the organization of work for much of the 20th century. Scientific management analyzed each organizational task to determine the most

efficient and productive way to work, and bureaucracy made sure that each person knew his or her place in the organization by creating a rational system of “offices” that defined each work role. Indeed, for much of the 20th century these two theories of organization were the defining features of 20th-century capitalism. As we will see in Chapter 6, in the late 20th century this system of classifying and differentiating tasks started to decline in influence as organizations turned to more “post-bureaucratic” arrangements that integrated tasks and focused more on skilled “knowledge workers.”

Goal Orientation

Whether nonprofit or for-profit, organizations are oriented toward particular goals. Indeed, one could argue that the goals of an organization are what provide it with its particular character, coalescing its members into something more than a random group of individuals. Barnard (1938) makes this goal orientation explicit in his definition of an organization: “An organization comes into being when (1) there are persons able to communicate with each other (2) who are willing to contribute to action (3) to accomplish a common purpose” (p. 82). Universities have education and research as their overarching goals; for-profit companies aim for excellence in their products and thus a large market share.



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The control of employees has been a focus of management research for more than 100 years.

Of course, organizations often have multiple and competing goals, making Barnard's idea of a "common purpose" a complex one. Within a large software company, for example, there may be conflict between the respective goals of the research and development (R&D) and marketing departments. The former might want to spend extra months perfecting a new software program, while the latter might be more interested in getting it to customers quickly and working the bugs out in later versions. At a large research university, students may want an educational experience that involves small class sizes and lots of contact time with professors, while the research focus of the institution tends to produce large classes (which are more efficient and cost-effective from the university administration's perspective) and little face-to-face contact with professors.

Sometimes company goals can conflict with those of other interest groups, such as community members, employees, or shareholders. In its goal to increase profits, a company might pollute the environment, lay off workers, overlook safety regulations, or move its production facilities to countries where labor is cheaper and workplace safety regulations are more lax. In recent years, shareholder groups have increased their power in publicly traded organizations; in consequence, the quarterly report has become a key marker of corporate success, with significant pressure on organizations to produce quick results. In her study of Wall Street investment banking, anthropologist Karen Ho (2009) shows how increased shareholder power has caused many corporations to move away from long-term planning and toward short-term returns on investment—a shift that has had negative consequences for the stability of the economy.

Control Processes

Control is a central, defining feature of complex organizations. As we discussed earlier, the goals and interests of employees and the larger organization frequently conflict, and so various forms of control are necessary to achieve coordinated, goal-oriented behavior. **Organizational control** is not, by definition, problematic; however, it can often have negative consequences for employees, as we will see below and in later chapters. While Redding (1988) presents two forms of control (hierarchy of authority, as well as rules, plans, and roles), we will outline five different control processes that have evolved since the emergence of the industrial capitalist organization in the late 19th century.

It is important to note that these forms of organizational control generally emerged as a response to employee efforts to exercise autonomy (Edwards, 1979). As such, each form of control can be thought of as an attempt to overcome the limitations of earlier control methods; to the degree that certain forms of control were unable to adequately corral worker autonomy and resistance (at least to the satisfaction of owners and managers), they were superseded by newer, more sophisticated forms of control. Direct control was superseded by technological control, technological control by bureaucratic control, and so forth.

Direct Control

The simplest way to control employees is to direct them in explicit ways and then monitor their behavior to make sure they are performing adequately. As such, many organizations

function through superior–subordinate relations, where the former has the authority to coerce the latter into working in specific ways. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, supervisors have been employed to make sure that workers diligently perform their tasks rather than take long breaks or talk to coworkers. As we will see in Chapter 3, in the early stages of industrialization such coercive forms of control were deployed to direct workers who were not used to working in factory settings where clock time ruled.

Such close supervision, however, is hardly a relic of 19th and early 20th century factories. You have probably had jobs where your work was closely monitored by a supervisor. In their cleverly titled book, *Void Where Prohibited*, Marc Linder and Ingrid Nygaard (1998) document restrictions on factory workers' rest and toilet breaks, arguing that such restrictions are more widespread now than they were in the early 20th century. The authors even document cases of workers wearing adult diapers on the production line because of the company's tight restrictions on toilet breaks! Indeed, in 2014 a call center worker in the United Kingdom had £50 deducted from his or her pay for using the bathroom—a case that became known as the “toilet tax” and raised questions in the U.K. parliament about fair treatment of workers. Direct supervisory control of workers, then, is still very much a feature of the modern organization.

However, one of the limitations of this form of control is that supervisors are not always able to directly control worker productivity. Certainly, supervisors can monitor the presence and absence of workers and reward or punish them accordingly, but getting them to work faster is not as easy as it might appear. For example, particularly in the early days of capitalism, workers often knew more about the work than their supervisors did and were able to disguise their level of productivity. Indeed, many groups of workers deliberately engaged in output restriction (partly as a way of preserving their jobs or preventing their piece rate from being cut—an issue we will discuss on depth in Chapter 3). Moreover, as organizations grew in size, it became increasingly difficult to directly monitor and control the work of employees. Technological control, then, was in part an effort to overcome the problems with direct forms of control.

Technological Control

As the name suggests, **technological control** involves the implementation of various forms of organizational technology to control worker productivity (Edwards, 1979). Henry Ford's introduction of the moving production line in automobile manufacturing in 1913 is the classic and most important example of such control. Indeed, this innovation revolutionized the production process in early industrial capitalism and helped usher in an era that we now refer to as “Fordism” (Chapter 3 will discuss this important development). Certainly, the moving production line was a more efficient system of production, but it also had the additional benefit (at least from a management perspective) of limiting workers' autonomy and their ability to control the rate of production; workers became largely an appendage to the assembly line at which they worked.

As our economy has shifted from heavy production to a service economy, the forms of technological control have changed. The fast-food industry is a good example of a modern form of technological control, where computer technology carefully regulates (down to the second) every task performed by the employee. At McDonald's, for example, even the

dispensing of soda is controlled to make sure exactly the right quantity is released into the cup—the employee has no room at all to exercise discretion (Ritzer, 2015). A more recent innovation is the introduction of scheduling software that allows companies to schedule employees to work shifts exactly when and where they are needed (Kantor, 2014). Big box stores like Walmart use such software to schedule more workers when there's a surge in sales, or send them home when sales are flagging. While this system is efficient and cost saving (employees aren't being paid when there's little work for them to do), it can have a damaging effect on the personal lives of the workers who are subject to this software. For example, scheduling child care can be difficult if one is called in to work at short notice, and making plans with friends or loved ones becomes difficult (not to mention planning on a consistent paycheck). Moreover, many of the employees subject to this software tend to be low-wage service industry workers who have little job security, making complaints about such a system difficult or dangerous to one's employment status.

In a service-oriented economy, customers, too, are subject to technological control. In fast-food restaurants, hard seats encourage customers to “eat and run,” and menu items are placed in highly visible locations so the customers are ready to deliver their orders as soon as they arrive at the head of the line (Leidner, 1993). In addition, customers are “trained” to line up to place orders and to bus their own trays in order to increase efficiency and productivity. Many fast-food restaurants, including McDonald's, now provide touch screens that enable customers to place orders without even speaking to a live person. Airport check-in is now mostly self-service, with customers doing the work that used to be done by airline employees—a significant cost savings for the airlines. And many companies (e.g., AT&T and



Bloomberg/Bloomberg/Getty Images

Technological forms of control often shift work from employees to customers

Comcast) use online customer discussion forums that enable customers to solve technical problems for each other, thus significantly reducing customer service expenses. Even restaurant chains like Chili's and Applebee's that have servers now feature electronic tablets at diners' tables, enabling customers to browse the menu, order items, and keep noisy children quiet with electronic games (Colt, 2014). The cost of investing in these tablets is more than offset by the extra items that customers order. Indeed, the purpose of introducing the tablets is precisely to drive up revenue—perhaps an indication that people are sometimes more comfortable interacting with electronic interfaces than real people. If you are a server in a restaurant, this change might lead to a decline in wait staff!

Finally, technological control in the form of electronic surveillance is widespread in organizations. With such technology, employees can never be certain when they are being monitored and thus are forced to behave at all times *as if* they are under surveillance. The philosopher Michel Foucault (1979a) has referred to this form of control as *panopticism*, after the Panopticon—a prison designed by the 19th century utilitarian thinker Jeremy Bentham. Bentham's prison was designed in a circular fashion so a guard in the central watchtower could observe all the prisoners without being visible himself. As such, the prisoners engaged in a form of self-policing. People working in telemarketing, for example, are subject to such surveillance by an invisible supervisor who can monitor their calls. Similarly, employees doing data-entry jobs often have their keystrokes counted, allowing employers to collect data on their productivity remotely.

Bureaucratic Control

Bureaucratic control has been a feature of organizations since the early 20th century and despite the recent shift to post-bureaucratic structures, it is still common in many organizations (Edwards, 1979). It emerged in part as a mechanism to counter some of the excesses of early capitalism, characterized by boom and bust cycles in which little long-range planning occurred (Sennett, 2006). As we will see in Chapter 3, the bureaucratic form is a central—perhaps defining—feature of Western democratic societies, enabling organization members to gain advancement on merit rather than based on one's connections. Indeed, one of the problems with technological control (particularly assembly line work at places like Ford) was that it brought thousands of workers together under one roof in difficult and alienating working conditions; many of these workers agitated for unionization of the workforce to improve pay and working conditions. The creation of bureaucratic control mechanisms—systems of formal rules, structures, job descriptions, merit systems, and so forth—thus promoted a more democratic workplace where employees were less subject to the arbitrary whims of supervisors.

In addition, bureaucracies tend to promote taken-for-granted ways of behaving—a very effective mechanism of control. By and large we don't think too much about the rules and regulations that shape our organizational lives, but they can be a highly effective means of coordinating and controlling organizational activity (Du Gay, 2000; Perrow, 1986). For example, the smooth running of your day on campus as you move from class to class would be impossible without an efficient bureaucratic system that carefully coordinates the schedule—timed to the minute—of every student and faculty member. In this sense, organizational life is unimaginable without at least some level of bureaucracy.

Of course, as we all know, bureaucratic systems can also be very alienating. It is very easy to feel like a number when we are trying to accomplish goals but are constantly thwarted by the red tape of bureaucracy. While bureaucratic forms of control were particularly dominant in the three decades after World War II, both workers and managers alike began to experience them as oppressive, constraining, and often inflexible. Bureaucratic organizations tended to be hierarchical, slow to change, and unsuited to an increasingly volatile global environment. Indeed, the 1970s was a period of stagnation for large U.S. and European corporations, and many workers engaged in industrial action against reduced benefits, layoffs, and the lack of a voice at work. This time period led to the emergence of a new form of control.

Ideological Control

As a response to the failure of bureaucratic control and the increasing employee resistance that it faced, **ideological control** refers to the corporate development of a system of values, beliefs, and meanings with which employees are expected to identify strongly. From a management perspective, the beauty of ideological control is that it requires little direct supervision of employees. Instead, if employees have been appropriately socialized into the organization's system of beliefs and values, then they have internalized what it means to work in the best interests of the organization. The focus of ideological control, then, is not the behavior of employees per se, but rather their sense of self. Some researchers have even referred to the development of this form of control as an effort to develop "designer selves" in employees; that is, identities that are connected to the goals and values of the company for which they work (Casey, 1995). For example, Nike employees who get a "swoosh" tattoo might be said to have a strong connection between their personal and corporate sense of self (such an employee calls himself or herself an "Ekin"—Nike spelled backwards!).

Ideological control emerged along with the corporate culture movement that became popular in U.S. organizations in the 1980s (Peters & Waterman, 1982). This movement developed as an effort to charge work with meaning and overcome the sense of alienation that bureaucratic organizations had promoted. Companies that promote a strong corporate culture often carefully vet potential employees to make sure they "fit" the culture and then make explicit and carefully calibrated efforts to indoctrinate new employees through training programs such as "culture boot camp." For example, Disney employees are put through an intensive training program where they learn how to maintain the seamless fantasy that is the hallmark of Disney theme parks. Disney keeps a tight rein on its corporate culture; the Disney employee handbook even dictates the appropriate length and style of sideburns! Similarly, companies such as IBM, Whole Foods, and Southwest Airlines are recognized for their distinctive cultures. The success of Southwest as a low-cost airline has been attributed in no small part to management's cultivation of a culture of fun among employees at all levels (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1996).

One of the interesting features of corporate culture and ideological control is that it often focuses more on the values, meanings, and emotions connected to work than it does on the technical aspects of work. While direct, technological, and bureaucratic forms of control all attempt to shape how work actually gets done, ideological control tends to

focus more on cultivating in employees a set of feelings that will connect them emotionally to the organization. In this sense, ideological control aims to develop strong “corporate clans,” with employees having a strong sense of connection to the clan’s belief system.

While this form of control can be an effective means of creating an engaged, energized workforce, it can also be quite oppressive to many organization members, particularly as it often asks the employee to invest his or her very identity, or sense of self, in the company. However, it is a form of oppression that is often disguised as something else—for example, being a “team” or “family” member. Employees who don’t fit with the team or family may feel alienated from their work. Management scholar John Van Maanen’s (1991) account of his experience working at Disneyland is a great example of someone who resists the ideological control to which he is subjected—and loses his job as a result! In fact, one of the main problems with ideological control and corporate culture was precisely that employees often saw through these thinly veiled efforts to manipulate their feelings. Management scholar Gideon Kunda’s (1992) famous study, *Engineering Culture*, for example, shows how seasoned employees viewed the strong culture of a high-tech corporation with a great deal of cynicism. And David Collinson’s (1988) study of a U.K. engineering firm shows how the shop-floor workers dismissed management efforts to introduce a new corporate culture as a “let’s be pals” act aimed at co-opting workers.

Thus, while ideological control and corporate culture were introduced as a way to revitalize the workplace and tap into employees’ desire for more meaningful work, it ended up imposing a new system of conformity that tried to get all employees to share the same values and beliefs. Interestingly, the corporate culture model emerged at the time when a new organizational form—post-Fordism—was beginning to emerge, and it also signaled a shift to a new form of organizational control.

Biocratic Control

While ideological control rests on the assumption that a company needs to create a strong internal culture with which employees identify, **biocratic control** shifts the focus away from such conformity, instead attempting to capture the diversity of its workforce. Thinking of organizations as “biocracies” (Fleming, 2014b) focuses on the idea that in the current, post-Fordist organization, it is “life itself” (bios) that companies are attempting to capture. What do we mean by this? For most of the history of industrial capitalism there has been a fairly clear separation between work and other aspects of people’s lives. Indeed, Fordist capitalism pretty much insisted that the two realms were kept separate (although Henry Ford himself did take a strong interest in his employees’ private lives, only hiring workers who abided by his strict moral code of sobriety and fidelity in marriage). For example, sociologist Hugh Beynon’s (1973) study, *Working for Ford*, reports the following workplace motto: “When we are at work, we ought to be at work. When we are at play, we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two.” Today’s post-Fordist organization has, in many respects, overturned this principle, introducing work into home and play, and home and play into the workplace. Many people work from home, and play has become a serious business; in turn, companies are increasingly creating organizational environments that draw on the creative energies and leisure activities that people have typically reserved for life away from work.

Management scholar Peter Fleming (2014b) coined the term *biocracy* to capture this new form of organizational control. Drawing from philosopher Michel Foucault's (2008) notion of "biopower" (or power over life itself), Fleming argues that today's organizations have largely erased the distinction between work and home or leisure, capturing parts of our lives not typically associated with work. Now, rather than attempting to limit worker autonomy through various forms of control, companies aim to enlist the whole employee, asking workers to "just be yourself" while at work (Fleming, 2014a, p. 87). However, this strategy does not mean only bringing personal authenticity to work but also thinking of one's entire life as framed by work.

Think, for example, about your own day-to-day life as a college student. With adjustment for your own particular college context, we imagine that many of you have schedules similar to the ones reported by journalist David Brooks (2001) in an article called "The Organization Kid," in which he interviewed students at Princeton University: "crew practice at dawn, classes in the morning, resident-adviser duty, lunch, study groups, classes in the afternoon, tutoring disadvantaged kids in Trenton, a cappella practice, dinner, study, science lab, prayer session, hit the StairMaster, study a few hours more." Brooks indicates that some students even make appointments to meet with friends, lest they lose touch. Does this kind of daily schedule sound familiar to you?

Brooks's point is that students willingly (and happily) pursue these punishing schedules because they see it as necessary for the continual process of career advancement; they are basically spending 4 years as professional, goal-oriented students whose goal is continuous self-improvement. But this self-improvement is less about shaping one's intrinsic sense of well-being, and more about preparing oneself for a highly competitive market in which one's "brand" must be distinguishable from all the others. We suspect that a high percentage of you are engaged in precisely this kind of self-disciplinary activity in an effort to distinguish yourselves from one another and make yourselves more marketable to potential employers.

Biocratic control has emerged as the relationship between organizations and employees has shifted away from the post-World War II social contract of stable, lifetime employment and toward free agency and a climate of much greater instability in the job market. This instability is reflected not only in people's high mobility in the job market but also in the fact that "the self" (the identity of each employee) has become a project each individual must constantly work on—and not just at work. Because the project of the self is never finished and must be continuously monitored and improved (in order to meet an ever more competitive work environment), people live in a persistent state of anxiety about the value of their individual brand. Thus, individuals constantly engage in behaviors where the creation and continual improvement of an "entrepreneurial self" is the goal (Holmer Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). Our entire lives are therefore framed through work in the sense that everything we do becomes an extension of our desire to be economically competitive. As Lair and Wieland (2012) show, college students even have to strategically defend their choices of major to justify how employable it makes them (have you had to defend your choice of major to family and friends?). As such, we become our own entrepreneurial projects in which career is a defining construct around which life decisions are made. In its most extreme form, the constant efforts to manage and maintain an entrepreneurial self has led to a concern with "instafame" (Marwick, 2015) in which everyone

is trying to develop a presence in the “attention economy.” People post YouTube videos of themselves, tweet, write blogs, and engage in whatever behavior might attract eyeballs and hence add to one’s brand (Duffy, 2017; Duffy & Hund, 2015).

Fleming argues that within the current system of biocratic control, the employee “is probably one of the most micro-managed of all time” (2014a, p. 37). While the previous forms of control we discussed provide opportunities for resistance and autonomy, biocratic control is more difficult to escape precisely because it encompasses all aspects of life and is largely taken for granted. We now live in an economic and political system—neoliberalism—in which the individual (rather than the social) reigns supreme, and every behavior is evaluated in terms of its potential to be marketized (i.e., turned into economic value). It’s hard for us to leave our unfinished tasks at work, and it’s difficult to ignore the email from a coworker or supervisor that arrives in our inbox at 9 p.m. Our work identities and social identities are increasingly inseparable, leading some scholars to speak of the “social factory” (Gill & Pratt, 2008); that is, the notion that work has spilled outside of the organization, and economic value is created no longer only *in* organizations but also by the everyday activities in which we routinely engage. For example, every time we post something on our Facebook accounts, we create data points for Facebook that can be analyzed and sold to marketers so that they can target us with advertising that fits our tastes (Cote & Pybus, 2011). While this idea of biocratic power might be difficult to grasp at the moment, don’t despair—we will discuss it in more detail in Chapter 6 when we talk about post-Fordism.

Summarizing the Five Forms of Control

Given the centrality of the ideas of power and control in this book, it is important to keep several issues in mind. First, many organizations use multiple forms of control at the same time. For example, an employee might be subject to direct control and bureaucratic control and also be heavily indoctrinated into the company’s ideology. Furthermore, while analytically distinct, these forms of control overlap in practice in the workplace; for example, an organization’s culture (ideological control) might emphasize a value system based on the importance of hierarchy and rule following (bureaucratic control), as is the case with military organizations.

Second, these forms of control operate with decreasing levels of direct coercion and increasing levels of participation by employees—in other words, control occurs via active consent. Thus, direct control is the most coercive (telling someone exactly what to do), while biocratic control is the least coercive (autonomous employee behavior and decision making). However, the development of less explicit and coercive forms of control does not mean that control is no longer an important issue in daily organizational life. Indeed, the development of more sophisticated forms of control suggests a greater need to understand the everyday dynamics of such control and its impact on our lives as organization members.

Third, as we indicated above, each form of control tends to develop in response to the failure of earlier forms of control to adequately deal with employee autonomy and resistance. In this sense, we can view each new form of control as building on earlier forms.

Finally, the increasingly sophisticated forms of organizational control require a similarly sophisticated understanding of the role of communication in these control processes. Direct, technological, and bureaucratic forms of control rely mainly on a fairly simple

understanding of communication as information transmission, while ideological and biocratic forms of control depend on a view of communication as complex and central to the construction of employee identities and organizational meaning systems—issues that figure prominently in this book. In other words, ideological and biocratic forms of control can only be properly understood through the constitutive conception of the communication-organization relationship that we discussed above.

In the final section of the chapter we turn to a discussion of the relationships among communication, organization, and work. Because most of you reading this book are at the beginning of your professional careers and are probably thinking less about organizations per se and more about jobs, it is important that the topics discussed in this book take into account the changes in the nature of work that have occurred over the last 30 years. In this sense, the work world that you will be entering is quite different from the one that your parents or grandparents entered.

COMMUNICATION, ORGANIZATIONS, AND WORK

All societies have had work at their centre; ours is the first to suggest that it could be something much more than a punishment or a penance

—Alain De Botton (2009, p. 106)

This book is about organizational communication, but it's also about work and its place in our lives. After all, unless we are independently wealthy, most of us take for granted that we must work for a living. Work is what enables us to pay the bills and put food on the table. Work provides us with the resources we need to purchase both life's necessities and the little luxuries that make life more palatable. Moreover, work gives us a sense of self-worth and achievement. In other words, work—and particularly working for a living—is very much a defining feature of our lives (think about one of the first questions you ask when you meet someone). It is a dominant part of the social imaginary (the ideas, values, and institutions that define us as a society) that shapes who we are and our connection to the broader society in which we live (Weeks, 2011). At the same time, however, work in the 21st century is increasingly both insecure and unsatisfying. As much as work defines who we are, however, many of us are unhappy with our jobs. Consider the following statistics:

- The Conference Board's 2016 annual report on job satisfaction among U.S. workers indicates that only 49.6% of workers are satisfied with their jobs—down from a 61.1% job satisfaction rate when the annual survey began in 1987 (although the 2016 figure is the highest since 2005).
- A 2013 Gallup poll of 230,000 full- and part-time workers in 142 countries indicated that only 13% of these workers felt engaged by their jobs (i.e., found work interesting, with opportunities for participation in decision making).
- A 2015 Gallup survey indicated that only 32% of U.S. workers felt engaged by their jobs (Adkins, 2016).

- A 2018 Gallup survey reports that while 69% of Germans report being satisfied with their jobs, only 15% feel engaged by their work (Nink & Schumann, 2018).
- A 2018 Gallup report states that engaged and talented workers with at least 10 years of tenure at one company constitute only 5% of the workforce.

We are faced, then, with an interesting contradiction—most of us are heavily invested in and defined by our work, but a majority of us are dissatisfied with the work we do. We often experience it as alienating, meaningless, and—increasingly in the last 20 years—insecure and in flux. In addition, as the last statistic suggests, few people are staying in one job for a long time. Work is therefore a taken-for-granted aspect of modern society, and yet it is a condition that many of us struggle with and against.

It is important, then, that we think carefully about our relationship to work. Yes, we are by definition organizational beings, but to what degree does that mean that we are, therefore, defined by our work? The sociologist Max Weber pointed out that in traditional, precapitalist societies, people worked to live; that is, they worked only to the degree that they could produce or earn what they needed to maintain themselves and their families. Today, however, we live to work. Our jobs have become much more than the means through which we reproduce ourselves and have instead become invested with all kinds of symbolic value, levels of prestige, and psychological motivations (Gini, 2001). We are consumed by work and committed to an ethic that says that if we are not working hard and pursuing successful careers, then we are failing to realize our potential as human beings. As Alain de Botton's quote at the beginning of this section points out, work used to be a form of punishment that only the lowest classes in society (slaves, peasants, etc.) performed. Now work holds an exalted place in our imaginations.

But in the 21st century, work has become more problematic as a defining feature of life. While everyone is expected to pursue jobs and careers (and will experience negative sanctions by society if they don't), the economic system that dominated much of the 20th century has undergone changes that render the place of work in our social imaginary more problematic. Recently two articles appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* on the same day. One article reported that since 2010 fully half of the jobs created in the European Union have been temporary work, with young job seekers stuck in a constant cycle of seeking jobs (Alderman, 2017). The other article reports that around 40% of U.S. workers in their 20s receive some kind of financial support from their parents—the product of an increasingly insecure work environment, exacerbated by the fact that skilled knowledge work is increasingly concentrated in urban areas, where rent and living expenses are high. When you are moving around from one temporary job to another, it's difficult to establish financial stability (Bui, 2017). Taken together, these two stories capture much about the nature of contemporary work and the shift toward what some refer to as a gig economy—a term coined at the height of the financial crisis in 2009, when many people were forced to take multiple, typically low-paying jobs with few or no benefits.

Currently there are about 57 million people in the United States who work in the gig economy—around 34% of the working population. It is predicted that by 2027, this figure will increase to over 50%; in other words, the majority of the workforce will be freelance (Freelance Union & Upwork, 2017). Companies like Uber, TaskRabbit, Airbnb, and Etsy offer the opportunity for people to be their own bosses and work when they want (opening up possibilities

for greater work–life balance). But while the possibility of greater work autonomy and lifestyle flexibility is a potential positive effect, there are a number of problems with this kind of work. For example, workers in the gig economy do not get the benefits typically associated with full-time employment—health care, pension plan, vacation days, and so forth. Indeed, people who work for companies like Uber are not actually employed by Uber; they are independent contractors who work for themselves and pay Uber a commission on each fare. Moreover, gig economy work tends to be low paid, and so such workers tend to have multiple jobs, thus undermining the idea that the gig economy leads to more balance between work and life.

Some authors (e.g., Livingston, 2016) have argued that the labor market in 21st century capitalism has broken down to the point where it no longer provides opportunities for productive and fulfilled lives, and thus we need to radically rethink our relationship to work. The ongoing effects of technology, outsourcing, globalization processes, and the shifts away from manufacturing to service and knowledge work mean that, in many respects, the “job” as we traditionally know it is disappearing. Mulcahy (2016), for example, argues that many companies now see hiring full-time employees as an act of last resort and instead develop business models that rely heavily on contract and part-time workers. Recognizing this economic reality, Mulcahy says that she tells her MBA students that they should stop looking for a job and instead look for work; in other words, they should develop an independent mindset and a repertoire of critical skills that are flexible and applicable to a wide array of work opportunities rather than honed for a specific job or career trajectory. However, a recent *Harvard Business Review* article makes the significant point that the hardest thing about working in the gig economy for which Mulcahy coaches her students is that it’s difficult to create a cohesive sense of self. Because our identities are so closely tied to our work, “those engaged in multiple jobs may find themselves plagued with issues of authenticity: who am ‘I’ really, if I’m all these things at once?” (Caza, Vough, & Moss, 2017).

So many workers today face a basic contradiction: On the one hand, work in the gig economy is, by definition, insecure; on the other hand, we want work to be meaningful, satisfying and provide us with a strong sense of identity. How do we develop this strong and coherent sense of self when the work we invest in is insecure and contingent? Social philosopher André Gorz (1999) has argued that we live an age of “generalized insecurity,” in which the traditional touchstones of stability and identity—family, community, work, religious affiliation, and so on—have become increasingly unstable. This issue is becoming particularly acute because the topic of meaningful work has exploded in the last few years. Most people don’t just want a job; they want work that is meaningful and rewarding.

CRITICAL RESEARCH 1.1

Kristen Lucas (2011). The working class promise: A communicative account of mobility-based ambivalences. *Communication Monographs*, 78, 347–369.

Kristen Lucas’s study is based on interviews with 62 people who identify as working class, and provides fascinating insight into how people make sense of their class positioning in society. Lucas argues that while the American Dream of individual success is a pervasive and empowering discourse

in U.S. society, for working class people, their relationship to this discourse is quite complex. On the one hand, the American Dream speaks to possibilities for social mobility; on the other, for members of the working class, loyalty to one's class roots is also a powerful and compelling discourse. In her interviewees' talk about work, Lucas identifies a discourse that she calls the "working class promise." This discourse, she argues, has four prominent themes: (1) a strong work ethic, (2) provision for one's family, (3) the dignity of all work and workers, and (4) humility—never becoming arrogant or pretentious and forgetting one's roots. Lucas argues that this working class promise discourse complicates the relationship of working class people to the American Dream discourse because the former treats class as a socially constructed value system, while the latter treats class as an objective structure. Thus, within the constructed value system of the working class promise, interviewees created a value hierarchy in which working class values were elevated above those of the elite or upper class, middle class, and nonworking poor—a social construction that is in conflict with the American Dream class hierarchy of upper class, middle class, working class, and lower class. As Lucas shows, this conflict between the values of the working class promise and the ideals of the American Dream creates a paradox for members of the working class: "Whereas the goal of the American Dream is to rise out of the ranks of the lower social class . . . the goal of the Working Class Promise is to maintain membership of the class by upholding a shared, work-related value system" (p. 364). Members of the working class (especially those who are socially mobile) "must negotiate culturally contradictory mandates of both maintaining *and* rising above their social class origin. Consequently, feelings of ambivalence should be expected as straddlers must engage in complex negotiations of identity work to align their class-based identities in such ways to position themselves as both achievers of the American Dream and keepers of the Working Class Promise" (p. 365). In general, Lucas effectively illustrates the degree to which class is, at least in part, a communicatively constructed phenomenon that has a profound effect on how we view ourselves.

Discussion Questions

1. What class do you identify with? Why? What are markers of your class membership? Do you even believe that class exists in U.S. society? Why or why not?
2. Have you experienced anything similar to the respondents in Lucas's study? Have you experienced a transition from one class to another (e.g., through getting an education and improving your job prospects)? How do you negotiate this straddling of cultures and classes?
3. Would you identify any additional themes to the ones that Lucas identifies as making up the discourse of the working class promise? Is there a similar discourse of the middle class promise or the upper class promise?

How is this discussion of contemporary work connected to communication issues? Our position in this book will be that just as organizations are communicatively constructed, so is work. Indeed, we would argue that in 21st century capitalism, work and communication are intimately connected (Kuhn, Ashcraft, & Cooren, 2017). We both make sense of

work through communicative processes and do work through communication. As we will see in the chapter on branding, today communication (rather than manufacturing products) is the primary medium of profit for companies. How we understand work and our relationship to it is intimately related to our connections to others—friends, family, community, and so forth. Work as a social imaginary is communicated to us through group, cultural, and societal discourses that shape its place in our lives and how it figures in our sense of self. As Lucas's (2011) study of members of the working class shows (see "Critical Research" above), people draw on and enact prominent discourses that circulate in their communities as they attempt to make sense of themselves as workers. Regardless, however, of whether you view yourself as working, middle, or upper class (a recent Pew Research Center report shows that the U.S. middle class is shrinking, down from 61 % of adults in 1971 to 50 % in 2015 (Pew, 2015), we all construct and negotiate our relationships to work, largely through the cultural and societal discourses that are available to us—discourses that, as we will see in the course of this book, change over time.

Thus, as you work through this book, it's important to keep in mind that while work and organizations are a ubiquitous and defining feature of our lives, the ways in which we experience them are not natural and inevitable. Organizations and work in the 21st century are the product of centuries of human struggle over what society and our place in it should be like. This book is an effort to help you understand the complexities of that struggle, the better to engage with it.

CRITICAL CASE STUDY 1.1

A Conduit Model of Education

In a very real sense, how we *think about* communication has consequences for how we *behave and communicate* with others. Stephen Axley (1984) illustrates this powerfully in an argument regarding the dominance of the "conduit metaphor" in organizations. Following linguist Michael Reddy, Axley suggests that everyday talk about communication is dominated by an information transmission model that operates according to four implicit assumptions: (1) Language transfers thoughts and feelings between people, (2) speakers and writers insert thoughts and feelings into words, (3) words contain those thoughts and feelings, and (4) listeners and readers extract those thoughts and feelings from the words (p. 429). This model is implicit in everyday expressions such as "He couldn't get his ideas across" and "She tried hard to put her thoughts into words." Let's look at the consequences of this model for the education process.

In U.S. colleges and universities, there is an increasing tendency toward large classes with enrollments of 400 to 500 students. The educational principles embedded in this tendency operate according to a conduit, transmission model of communication. Large class sizes mean that any interaction between professor and students is highly limited, with the dominant discourse being a monologue by the professor. In keeping with this monologue, students view themselves as the

passive recipients of information transmitted by the professor. Knowledge consists of information inserted into words and transmitted from the professor's mouth to the students' brains, with lecture notes operating as the repository of such information. Professors try to ensure effective transmission of information by introducing redundancy into the system via the use of PowerPoint, repeating main issues, creating podcasts, putting lectures on iTunes, and so forth.

But the conduit model completely undermines any conception of education as an active and dynamic process in which students and professors engage in dialogues about interpretive possibilities. With pedagogy reduced to the transmission of hard, nonnegotiable facts, we are unable to recognize the extent to which knowledge production is actually a highly contested, contingent, and ever-changing process. The unhappy result is that by the time students do finally get to participate in classes of 20 or 30 (usually in their senior years), they have become little more than efficient note takers. They simply want to know what the truth (at least in test-taking terms) is so they can write it down. Many students have thus been trained to apply a monologic model to a dialogic context.

Moreover, one might argue that the dialogic model is inefficient and unproductive in a context where students have become professional self-entrepreneurs who view education as a means to improving their personal brand equity. The knowledge acquired in courses is useful only if translated into a stellar GPA and well-rounded transcript.

Discussion Questions

1. In groups or individually, develop a definition of communication. In what sense is it similar to or different from the conduit model of communication?
2. To what extent has your experience of college education been similar to the one described here? How has it been different?
3. If you were to create the ideal educational environment, what would it look like? Identify some principles of organizational communication discussed in this chapter that might help you formulate this ideal.
4. Do you agree or disagree with the view of today's students as discussed under biocratic control? Why or why not? How would you describe your own student identity?

CONCLUSION

In this first chapter, we have tried to raise some questions about our commonsense understandings of organizations and work. By adopting a critical communication perspective, we can move away from thinking of organizations as formal structures within which we communicate and toward thinking of organizations as existing only because of the collective

communication processes in which people engage. In this sense, *communication constitutes organization*—a principle that will guide us throughout this book, and which is foundational to the critical communication perspective on organizations and work that this book adopts.

As we have discussed in this first chapter, such a critical communication perspective views organizations as communicative structures of control in which organizations attempt to manage the tension between individual and organizational goals and values. Indeed, one of the claims that underlies this book is the idea that all management theories from the early 20th century to the present are premised on the understanding of the need to manage this crucial tension.

However, while this chapter has provided us with a sense of the big picture, we do not yet have a detailed sense of the specific lens or perspective we will use to examine these different management and organization theories and bodies of research. As will become clear in the course of this book, it is impossible to examine theory and research without adopting a position oneself (even though many textbooks tend to adopt a “God’s-eye view,” a view from “nowhere and everywhere”). As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, this book is written explicitly from a critical communication perspective, and so Chapter 2 will be devoted to a detailed discussion of this approach. We will discuss the history of the critical perspective and its underlying assumptions, goals, and values. By the end of the chapter, we will have a useful set of principles with which to make sense of the complex terrain that constitutes the field of organizational communication studies.

CRITICAL APPLICATIONS

1. Individually or in groups, identify the different forms of control addressed in this chapter. Think about instances where you have experienced these forms of control. Some will be routine and everywhere; others will be more unusual. How did they make you feel? What were your responses to these experiences? To what degree do you take these control mechanisms for granted? Are there situations where you have tried to resist or circumvent organizational control mechanisms?
2. Choose a news story that features some aspect of organizational life and explore how you might take a communication perspective on the issue that the news story explores.

KEY TERMS

biocratic control	19	direct control	14	organizational control	14
bureaucratic control	17	ideological control	18	task time	5
clock time	6	organizational communication	11	technological control	15
communication	11				

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