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Word Unplugged:

Transcending the

New Social Communication Contract

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Abstract

Turbulent and far-reaching work environments, the loss of boundaries in our professional and personal lives, and most importantly, the influence of technology have resulted in abbreviated and sterile—and therefore unsatisfying—communication practices, as well as a self-centered mindset regarding interpersonal communication. The emergence of this new social communication contract (NSCC) values speed, efficiency, and accessibility over other potential benefits of interaction. An antidote to this current cultural condition exists in meaningful exchange through mindful discourse, the usefulness of which can be explained through communication theory. Symbolic interactionism reveals the importance of "symbols [language] and shared meaning as the binding factors in society" (Littlejohn, 1977, p.85). Narrative theory describes our desire to connect through language, specifically as storytellers and listeners, and rhetorical theory offers insight into the power of language to connect emotionally and to inspire. An application of these theoretical constructs is analyzed in light of the NSCC.

Word Unplugged:

Transcending the

New Social Communication Contract

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:1

As you read this opening line from the Bible you may wonder if I am planning to embark upon a religious exploration of some kind (*no*). Or, you may suspect that a panicked graduate student desperately struggling to write her Master's thesis might find that a little "shout out" to the man upstairs couldn't hurt (*maybe, just a little*). The real reason that this paper opens with those words is because they demonstrate that words are commanding; they are enduring; they are inspiring, and they are meaningful.

Or, at least, they can be. There is a power that exists in language – to tell a story, to express emotion, to connect as human beings. The sense-making that occurs through the interpretation of the symbols that are language is what makes us human, what separates us from animals (Burke, 1966; Littlejohn, 1977). But what happens when that symbolic activity is diminished through the means of interaction? If we are oblivious to the power of words, and our most important goal is to "accomplish" communication immediately and efficiently, is what we gain worth what we lose?

Thanks to advancements in technology, we can be "always on" (King, 2009) – always accessible, always available. But how "available" are we *really*? These new advancements often allow us to run broad, but not deep. Conley (2009) notes that "in the networked economy . . .we face a paradox of small worlds and weak ties" (p.170)

and Florey (2009) laments "we live in a fast-moving stripped down world, one that's efficient to the point of sterility" (p. 20). This "sterility" within our technologically influenced communication reflects a loss of intentional, purposeful, and even passionate language that forges emotional, meaningful connections.

That is not to say that technology and emotion are mutually exclusive. I remember the first time I felt true hatred for the almighty Blackberry. I was trying to discuss something with my husband, whether or not we could make a contribution to support our friends who are missionaries overseas. The conversation was challenged in the usual ways: with multiple interruptions by our two young boys, the dog barking, the microwave timer dinging. But we were trying to plough through, and I was making my argument for why I felt compelled to answer their letter of solicitation with a gift, saying, "Shanna was just so important to me during such a pivotal time in my life. Not to sound hokey, but her friendship really informed my faith. You know, after I miscarried that spring . . . " And at that exact moment, with the words on the tip of my tongue and tears beginning to sting in my eyes, my dear, sweet husband – love of my life for the past twenty years and all-around good guy – reached to the ever-present clip on his waistband, released his Blackberry, and glanced down briefly before his fingers began reflexively and furiously texting. In a split-second he looked back up.
 "I'm listening," he said.

When did we become so distracted in our relationships that it is commonplace to engage in two (or more) conversations at once? When did we decide that it was unnecessary to *commit* to one conversation, one person, one connection, at a time? In his defense, my physician husband was undoubtedly answering an email from work

when I was reliving the loss of our first pregnancy. But this is as critical an aspect of this challenge as anything else: the relationship between technology and work and the loss of purposeful interpersonal discourse is inextricable and significant.

This paper explores how technology has changed our cultural landscape and then utilizes communication theory to illuminate how the purposeful use of language can assist in a gratifying navigation of this new social reality. In order to explore these cultural forces in our personal lives, I must first examine how technological advances combined with other changes have impacted the world of work, creating an employment environment without boundaries where work is endless and the influence of work is pervasive. I describe a "new social *communication* contract" [NSCC] (a take on the work of Buzzanell, 2000) demonstrated by our privileging speed, efficiency, and accessibility over other potential benefits of interaction. In addition, we seem to be working more and more—and even when we are not physically working the influence of work pervades all aspects of our lives (Buzzanell, 2000; Deetz, 1991; Eisenburg & Goodall, 2004). Ironically, while we work more we seem to have less tangible proof of it in the new "knowledge economy" (Conley, 2009). I examine how these changes in the working world have spilled over into our personal lives. This current cultural condition begs for meaningful interpersonal exchange. Mindful discourse can address these communication challenges, both in how we think about communicating with others, as well as in the quality of our communication. Conscious consideration of others when we communicate combined with increased attention to the quality of our discourse helps to underscore meaningful human connections.

My interest in this topic stems from what I consider to be a unique perspective combined with a universal experience. I am a 38 year- old graduate student in the study of Organizational Communication. As I type on my laptop, I hear the customary clicking in the next room of my husband answering an email on his Blackberry, as well as the familiar sound of my two young children fighting over who gets to play the Star Wars game on his Leapster. Technology in all of its useful and annoying forms surrounds me, as it does everyone, but two things suggest that my experience may be instructive in understanding the impact of all of this. First, my age: As a late thirty-something, I am reasonably schooled in technology but I also remember a time before it was so pervasive. I am a bipolar participant in the always- on culture: in excited awe of what has been gained by these advancements, and in anxious mourning for that which may be lost. Second, my studies in Organizational Communication have informed the way that I make sense of these communication challenges. Subsequently, this paper critically examines the nature of interpersonal communication within our contemporary culture as impacted by the explosive influence of technology, and of work, within all aspects of our lives, and calls for a return to meaningful exchange through mindful discourse.

The usefulness and importance of mindful discourse through purposeful language can be explained through communication theory, particularly symbolic interactionism, narrative theory, and rhetorical theory. Symbolic interactionism reveals the importance of "symbols [language] and shared meaning as the binding factors in society" (Littlejohn, 1977, p.85). Narrative theory describes our desire to connect through language, specifically as storytellers and listeners. Finally, rhetorical theory

offers insight into the power of language to improve our interactions with one another through inspirational and emotional speech. These theories taken together offer the possibility of a new, socially constructed reality that informs individual identity and organizational viability with potential benefits to the culture at large.

Below I examine the impact of technology on the world of work; the pervasive influence of work life upon individuals; and the impact of "producing the intangible" (Conley, 2009) in our culture. I examine how these changes affect the individual as professional as well as the individual's overall sense of self.

<div align="center">Always On</div>

The New World of Work

The unfortunate multi-tasking mindset (so common in our contemporary culture) obvious in the aforementioned interpersonal exchange with my husband reflects something that has also happened within the world of work. In the past, people (family, friends, co-workers) expected a commitment of time and focused attention from each other which ideally resulted in quality communication – communication that reflected the importance of the human relationships involved. Eisenburg and Goodall (2004) note that "In the present turbulent environment, traditional ways of doing business – and of communicating – are no longer effective. Instead, new principles of effective organizational communication must be developed to reflect the new environment-principles that transcend time and space" (p. 19).

With advances in technology the need for speed, convenience, and accessibility has dominated the business landscape. The "emphasis on speed" (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2004, p 12) and lack of emphasis on other potential priorities (including strong

interpersonal connections) along with globalization, downsizing, and outsourcing has contributed to a stormy work environment. This reality has influenced a shift in the expectations between organizations and individuals, from relationships that were secure and enduring, to limited relationships of convenience. This cultural shift for organizations and for employees is part of what has been described as a "new social contract[1]" (Buzzanell, 2000). This New Deal, so to speak, can be a fleeting and temporary situation: I can promise you a job today if you promise to be fast and proficient. We both understand that there is no real commitment here. The business is loyal to the bottom line; you, the individual, are loyal to yourself. Lehrer (1996) observes that " . . .a major concern is job insecurity, resulting in feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness" (in Buzzanell, 2000, p.228) and Eisenburg and Goodall (2004) note that "the near feeling of continuous change is disturbing to many people, and each of us, regardless of industry, is challenged to find ways to deal with it" (p. 5).

Eisenberg and Goodall (2004) note that the traditional social contract between employers and employees "stipulated that acceptable performance and good behavior would be rewarded with lifetime employment" (p.15) but that today "this relationship between organizations and employees [is] obsolete." They observe:

In the new career and social contract, the organization is the site of transactions

in which there is a short-term exchange of benefits and services . . . Using the

image of organizations as transient or interim sites for exchange, it is easy to see

how people can behave as dispassionate free agents who have no ties to

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[1] There is not universal agreement as to the existence of the new social contract. Conley (2009) argues that "volatility has greatly decreased over the last 25 years" (p. 11). The difference in his analysis may be a matter of semantics; also, it is important to consider the *feeling* associated with the working relationship regarding loyalty, commitment, security, etc. This clearly seems to have changed, and even more so today.

anyone, anything, or anyplace (Buzzanell, 2000, p. 223).

The new social contract that reflects the reality of the world of work also exists in our everyday dealings with each other. This "new social *communication* contract" (NSCC) is also built upon immediacy and accessibility. Unfortunately, valuing speed and accessibility over other aspects of interpersonal connections, underscored by our constant use of technology in our communication, has left many of us feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, empty, and exhausted. Prusak and Cohen (2001) observe that the ability to forge strong relationships built on trust in the new economy is seriously challenged because "social capital is under assault in most organizations today because of rising volatility and over reliance on virtuality" (p.87).

In the book *Elsewhere, USA*, Dalton Conley (2009) describes this contemporary human condition as "a constant juggling of iPhone-kept schedules that never quite sync" (p. xiv). He describes the impact of the technologically-saturated boundaryless work world on the individual in this way:

> In the twenty-first century, the boundary between work and home has largely disappeared, technological gadgets structure family life, business often intrudes on leisure . . . Many Americans . . .have morphed into a hyperactive people constantly shuttling between where we think we have to be . . . and where we think we should be . . . Those Americans who live in this "Elsewhere Society" are only convinced they're in the right place, doing the right thing, at the right time, when they are on their way to the next destination. Constant motion is a balm to a culture in which the very notion of authenticity . . . has been shattered into a thousand emails (p.8).

This constant need to be moving on to the next thing, next person, and next task is further complicated by the fact that we can be plugged in all of the time, further ensuring that there are no boundaries (necessarily) between work and home (and space and time). This underscores another social reality: that the influence of work is everywhere . . . even in our private lives. This impacts the individual as well as the larger culture in ways that are not always readily apparent. Below, I examine Stanley Deetz's (1991) exploration of the disempowering impact of professional infiltration into the personal "life world" arena.

Corporate Colonization

Deetz (1991) wrote about the insidious and often overlooked impact of corporate influence in our private lives in *Democracy in An Age of Corporate Colonization*. Deetz describes a "new feudalism" that, within the new knowledge economy, focuses on the "control of information and workers, rather than land" (p.15) and notes that "obedience to those in power [the corporation] supersedes . . . loyalty to church, family, community, or nation-state" (p.15). Part of what is troubling about this development is our lack of awareness of it, and its impact upon us. Deetz writes:

> It is small wonder that life is generally so integrated and harmonious. Children are born in corporate hospitals environmentally structured with corporate values of rationality and routine . . . go to corporate sites with their parents to participate in corporate-run daycare, and from there go to schools where they primarily learn positive work-related skills and attitudes (p. 15).

So at every turn, the decisions we make, the way we act towards family and friends, the way we prioritize (even in our personal lives) – to the extent that we demonstrate what

we value – is dictated by the needs of the corporation. These practices have become so commonplace that we don't even realize when they are at play. For example, the option of corporate daycares may, on the face of it, seem like a positive, supportive option for workers and their families. But a critical examination of this practice reveals the corporation's propensity to "[reorder] needs . . . where possible for the minimal intrusion into worklife" (p. 24). Deetz points out that a substantially more supportive option for families would "shift the burden away from the family and individual and require new principles of work organization" (p. 25) but that instead the allegiance to professional needs over private needs mandates a solution with minimal disruption for the workplace, and maximum disruption on the home front.

Deetz explores Habermas' idea of "inner colonization," noting that "in the progressive 'liberation' from traditional values and [language-based, life world] institutions, *efficiency and effectiveness* become the primary criteria for the evaluation in all of life" (p. 42) [italics mine]. This mirrors the limited value system inherent in the NSCC that values speed, efficiency and accessibility over other benefits of interaction. Deetz also explores Lyotard's (1984) understanding of the impact of these changes to personal identity, noting that "people have fleeting identities created by fragments of knowledge and meaning . . . They are bewildered, bemused, betrayed, or schizophrenic – lost in the fragments and living on borrowed identities" (p.40).

This creates a change on every level of our society "directing individual lives and influencing collective social development" (Deetz, 1991, p.17). This comprehensive infiltration of the world of work into the world of the personal, at the same time technology has obliterated all boundaries between work and home, ensures that

"workplace values and practices extend into nonwork life" (p. 17). One example of this is in our communication practices and preferences. While technology-supported communication may be highly useful for "task" related communication within a work setting, because it utilizes speed, efficiency, and accessibility, it may be less useful to forge meaningful connections within our private interpersonal interactions. However, the impact of "corporate colonization" ensures that even our everyday, personal communications will take on the tone and tenor of those that occur while we are working. Although Deetz explored these ideas almost twenty years ago, they very much resonate with our contemporary communication situation.

Another change in the world of work, thanks in part to our ever-increasing virtuality, is shift in our culture from producing material goods to an economy of "intangible" (Conley, 2009) products. Below I explore this phenomenon.

Made in the USA

Conley (2009) notes that "two thirds of the US economy is service based . . . [comprised of] a range of activities that are abstracted from the construction of a physical product that is consumed" (p.9) and that "since, for almost all of their great efforts, most professionals produce nothing tangible at their place of work, many can frequently feel like frauds" (p. 17). Friedman (2009) echoes this reality in regards to the current economic meltdown:

> As a country, too many of us stopped making money by making 'stuff" and
>
> started making money from money – consumers making money out of rising
>
> home prices and using the profits to buy flat-screen TVs from China on their

credit cards, and bankers making money by creating complex securities and

leverage so more and more consumers could get in on the credit game.

It is interesting to contemplate the impact of the loss of the tangible in this

postmodern society . . . and perhaps useful to ask these questions: If we are constantly

working, and the influence of work is everywhere, is it detrimental to not have anything

(concrete) to show for it? At the end of the day, in spite of all of our advances and our

sophisticated evolution, do we need to have something we can hold in our hand? If so,

how is this need exacerbated by the virtual reality created through our constant use of

technology? And how does all of this combine to impact our use of language and the

way we interact with one another? [As Conley (2009) observes, "the info-economy puts

a premium on quk,shrt trms tht cn b txtd fst & rmmbrd easily" (p. 31)].

In subsequent sections I will address these questions through the lens of

communication theory. First, however, it is important to present a balanced picture of

the current communication situation. Below I acknowledge the usefulness of technology

and examine its undeniable benefits

Web 2.0 World[2]

Surely there are great benefits to the technology that has become second-nature

to us. I don't wish to sound like a clueless dinosaur who insists on arguing for a return to

some fantastical "good old days" when our communication was not assisted by

technology. Today, technological advancements support businesses and individuals in

ways once unimaginable. The US Census estimated that 183 million Americans had

access to the Internet in 2007 and columnist Kathleen Parker (2009) notes, "One-fifth of

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[2] *Web 2.0* is used to describe the post-"dot-com bubble" reality where social networks and web-based communities (made possible by the 2.0 applications) are prolific (O'Reilly, 2005).

the world's nearly 7 billion people are now Web-capable – all reporting, opining, interacting, twittering, digging, and blogging."

And personal connections *can* be greatly enhanced through the use of technology. From the most basic technologically supported forms of communication, like email or texting, to more sophisticated social networking sites like Facebook, there is a lot to offer those who wish to stay connected, and who wish to bond on an emotional level.

When Andrea, a friend from college, was suddenly killed in a car wreck over ten years after we graduated, those of us who had known and loved her were devastated. On the first anniversary of her death a friend started an email train that ultimately was printed and sent to Andrea's mother. In her opening email, she requested that we all circulate a favorite story or memory about our friend. In all, during the course of that day, fourteen different replies made the rounds, including these:

Tripp and I were talking this morning about how great AR was about our whole move to Atlanta. I was really sad about leaving DC, but Andrea was so enthusiastic about it that it made me excited to be here. She was bound and determined that we were going to love Atlanta, and immediately included me in all her plans. Bingo night at the VFW hall was a particular favorite, especially because you could bring beer AND smoke there - she was in her element, and all the old ladies there loved her. She knew EVERYONE - she was like the Mayor of the VFW; you can probably imagine her sweeping in and hollering "Irma! How the hell are ya! How's the kidney stone?" She was so nice about including me in stuff, and never made me feel self-conscious for

being the dorky new kid, even though that's exactly what I was. She was

always so good about making everyone feel welcome, as if it was just the

greatest thing in the world that you were there. Tripp, being new to AR, was

just SURE that he was her favorite person (I was always getting the smug

"Andrea called to invite us out, and she said she really wants me to come"

from him); I finally got sick of him and told him that AR's just like that

and he shouldn't get all George Clooney about it. I still don't think he

believes me, though (E. Piper, personal communication, July, 22, 2003).

And . . .

I think of AR so often; every time I do I hear that great, booming

cackle of hers like she's right here in the room. I think of her calling

to report the latest hysterical story about her adventures with her

legion of friends ("OK, you know my friend Sam who's the ex-boyfriend of

Diane who's roommates with Caroline who grew up next door to me in High

Point..."). I think of her listening to my stories with lots of UH-UH,

NO WAY's and OH MY GOD's thrown in, always egging me on to embellish the

details a little bit more. I think of the support she offered and never

let up on - she always called, always kept in touch, always remembered

the little things and the little gestures that keep friendship alive.

I also can't think of AR without thinking about the massive, sloppy

bashes we used to partake in, and I think the quintessential memory of

this comes from Tacky Party senior year (was this also her birthday??)

when AR wore that absolutely hideous, bug-infested "fur" coat, the old

lady hat with the little net veil, tons of blue eye shadow, and hideous

scarlet rouge all over her face. All night she dragged a nasty little

purse around filled with hair spray, smoking non-stop, cackling, and

speaking in nothing but a grating Brooklyn accent. Vintage AR! (B Scofield,

personal communication, July 22, 2003)

So when I read this, it brings tears to my eyes; I suspect it does not hold the same

power for you, dear reader – but there are still two compelling points illustrated in these

exchanges. First, there is the possibility to convey real emotion through a sterile

medium, like email, as evidenced in the emotion felt by me, the intended recipient. But

above and beyond that, and secondly, there is a power in these words even to those

who did not know Andrea. Because after reading them, I imagine you do feel you know

her a little bit. And while she is no longer here, those words, and the picture that they

paint, exist forever. The usefulness of this communication medium is distinct and

powerful – this exercise that spanned multiple states in real time and that pulsated with

an emotional bond between friends could not have occurred any other way.

　　While I have bemoaned the intrusion of work-related culture and communication

practices into our personal daily interactions, there is also no denying the increased

independence and empowerment (corporate colonization notwithstanding) that many

people experience as a true benefit of technology. Akkirman & Harris (2005) found that

"virtual office workers were more satisfied with organization communication than

traditional office workers" (p.397) and theorized that "being physically removed from the

social context of work might increase satisfaction because it allows the worker to focus on what will provide rewards" (p. 403).

In addition, the increased flexibility available through technology as related to work can, in some instances, have a positive impact on a private, personal level. When my grandmother died many years ago, I was certain that my then resident- husband would not be able to come to the funeral. It was to be held in a town up the road and he was allowed only one day off every six weeks. He had promised to try come, though, and as the minutes ticked away my disappointment mounted. Finally, as I began to line up with my cousins to process into the church for the service I saw him racing up the sidewalk. He had been granted permission to leave, but had to be available to answer pages from the hospital while he was gone. As this was before the ubiquitous presence of cell phones (can you even remember such a time?) and of course, Blackberries, he had to pull off the highway and use payphones at almost every exit between Charlotte and Concord –which he did. So the fact that his Blackberry now allows him some flexibility and freedom and in some ways reduces his stress, while making him available (though perhaps not completely present) to our family is something that is evident and for which I am thankful.

We all have multiple examples of these benefits in our everyday lives. And it is important to recognize that it is possible to utilize all that is argued for here – meaningful interaction and emotional connection through the purposeful use of language – in technology based interactions, as evidenced in part by the narratives exchanged by my college friends. But while we may be cognizant of the benefits of unending technology,

the point of this theoretical exercise stems from the fact that we are often dreadfully

unaware of the costs to us personally and collectively.

Communication theory illuminates the ramifications of the new social

communication contract that we have previously detailed, and also offers alternatives to

those aspects of our communicative behavior that are unsatisfying. Through an

exploration of symbolic interactionism, narrative theory, and rhetorical theory, we can

better understand what drives us to connect through language, what our current

communication situation may be lacking, and most importantly, how to regain our power

to connect and to create through purposeful discursive interaction.

Below I examine the ideas of symbolic interactionism (as understood through the

perspective of Blumer, Burke, and Goffman) and apply these concepts to the NSCC.

<div align="center">Transcending: The Theoretical Lens</div>

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the

social construction of reality through communication. While the NSCC may result in

thoughtless, sterile, static communication, symbolic interactionism embraces: the

conscious consideration of symbols and subsequent action based on that interpretation;

the fundamental role of language in the creation of symbol systems; a preference for

action (humanistic) versus motion (animalistic); and the impact upon personal identity

through the dramaturgical exercise. Each of these theoretical components is explored in

greater detail below.

The symbolic interactionist perspective as articulated by Blumer[3] utilizes three premises: "first, human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them; second, meaning arises out of social interaction . . .and [third], meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process" (Blumer, 1969, p.4-5). Thus, reality is socially constructed and continually reconstructed through an interactive process.

This idea of acting after interpreting is important to our understanding of what is lacking in our contemporary culture. Blumer (1969) observes that there are "two levels of social interaction in human society: conversation of gestures [non-symbolic interaction] and the use of significant symbols [symbolic interaction]" (p.8). While he notes that "humans beings engage plentifully in non-symbolic interaction as they respond immediately . . . to each other's bodily movements, expressions, and tones of voice" (p.8) that ideally, "this approach sees a human society as people engaged in living. Such living is a process of ongoing activity in which participants are developing lines of action" (Blumer, 1969, p. 20). This involves an emphasis on "conscious interpretation" (Littlejohn, 1977, p.87), such that humans are ideally conscious, engaged, and acting based on the information available to them socially.

The concerns with our contemporary communication preferences and practices beg the question: Are we conscious considerers when it comes to most of our communication? Or are we becoming more and more unconscious in our interactions and therefore completely unengaged?

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[3] There are multiple views within symbolic interactionism. The fundamental principles are widely accepted to have come from Mead, through the writings of his student Herbert Blumer. Two predominant schools of SI – the Chicago School and the Iowa School – emerged (Littlejohn, 1977). My discussion utilizes the humanistic tradition as described through Blumer and the Chicago School.

Symbolic interactionists note that "language functions as the vehicle for action" (p. 90). This interest in language as a fundamental part of creating our reality is useful to our analysis – since we are rarely conscious of our use of language (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2004), and especially so today with the NSCC. Lair (2004) observes that "just as we are often unable to see technologies because we take them for granted in everyday life, so we tend to see through language" (p. 442) noting that this is something that Burke (1966) called "naïve verbal realism" (p.5). But language plays a pivotal role in our interactions, connection, and understanding of each other and of life, and is, in fact "a constituent part of reality itself" (Lair, 2004, p. 442). As Burke (1966) observes:

> . . . can we bring ourselves to realize . . . just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by "reality" has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems? . . . And however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand, the whole overall "picture" is but a construct of our symbol systems. To meditate on this fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an ultimate abyss (p.5).

This observation affirms a need to be mindful when contributing to this symbol system, given the critical nature of language to the social construction of reality and the subsequent compulsion to act based on that construct.

Littlejohn (1977) notes Burke's idea that "people always filter reality through their symbolic screens . . . for an animal, reality just is, but for people, reality is mediated through symbols" (p.90) and that "while all objects and animals in the universe can be said to possess motion, only human beings have action" (p. 90). Our current compulsion to constantly engage in "reflexive digital behavior" (Croal, 2008) that "[fills]

the void with some sort of electronic activity" in our communication and interaction with each other suggests that part of our alienation and dissatisfaction may come from our being more in motion rather than in conscious action. Our ability to engage in conscious consideration of language, to interpret it, and to act is, in part, what makes us human (Blumer, 1969; Burke, 1966; Littlejohn, 1977). Burke notes that "language . . . becomes a reality-based form of action by transcending motion" (Golden, Burquist, Coleman, 1976, p.324).

But in the NSCC where our behavior is less thoughtful, and more reflexive, we find ourselves moving away from what makes us distinct as humans and moving towards an emotionless, animalistic existence because, in part, we seem to have lost our focus on purposeful language. And when we do so, we create a yearning for something that is inherent to our basic nature, which informs our contemporary malaise and lonely discontent. Burke (1966) notes that "If man is characteristically the symbol-using animal, then he should take pleasure in the use of his powers as a symbolizer, just as a bird presumably likes to fly or a fish to swim . . . we humans might like to exercise our prowess with symbol systems" (p.29) because there are "natural grounds for human delight in symbolic action" (p. 297).

While our contemporary communication offers some new and exciting ways to use and interpret symbols (think shorthand for texting and emoticons), the influence of the NSCC impedes the nuanced and comprehensive possibilities of symbol use. That is not to say that the evolution of symbols is unhelpful, just as it would be incorrect to criticize task-related communication in and of itself. The point is that there is a time and place for everything, and that careful consideration is required to utilize the best

symbols at the appropriate time. Many of the new symbol systems appear to reflect a reliance on reflexive (instinctive), versus reflective, communication tools and thus contribute to a mechanistic, NSCC style.

One way that humans distinguish themselves from animals, or machines, is through "dramatism," (Burke, 1966) which is an "aspect of man [as] an acting organism" (Littlejohn, p.90) based on the interpretation of symbols. This is in contrast to "mechanism," or the study of motion (Littlejohn, 1977, p. 90). Even as our current propensity may move us (unfortunately) towards a mechanistic existence, our natural instinct will drive us towards dramatism, especially as related to informing our sense of self.

Goffman (1959) expanded upon Burkean concepts of dramatism to coin "dramaturgy" as a way to describe all of life's interactions as performances, whereby "actors" present aspects of their identity to an audience in the hopes that their self-concept will be validated. He states that "life itself is a dramatically enacted thing . . . all the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways it isn't are not easy to specify" (Goffman, 1959, p.72).

Many dramaturgical concepts emerge as a part of symbolic interactionism (Crable, 2006; McCall & Simmons, 1978). These concepts include "role identity" (McCall & Simmons, 1978, p.65), which describes the "characters" individuals create when forming identity that play out in "role performances" (p. 69). Similarly, "role support" (p.70), describes the action of others in response to the performance which lend support to the abstract identity in play. This constant performing for and with others – a continuous seeking to legitimate an idealized concept of self - is so entrenched that our

very sense of personal identity may be dependent upon that legitimization (Goffman, 1959; McCall & Simmons, 1978).

With the NSCC we may find that all of our efforts, in the event that we are effortful in our communication, go towards attempting to control a role performance. This is a valid application of the theoretical idea; however, with the pervasive and sometimes insidious nature of online interactions, the impact upon individuals may be more detrimental than ever before. This idea will be explored later in the paper when we examine the experience of writer Tracy Curtis.

Through emphasizing "the role of the symbol and shared meaning as the binding factors in society" (Littlejohn, p.85), symbolic interactionism illustrates the importance of the language-interpretation-action connection, and illuminates where NSCC interaction falls short. Another communication theory that offers insight into what we desire through our communicative interactions, and where we may be lacking, is Narrative Theory. Below I look at Fisher's Narrative Paradigm in relation to the NSCC.

Narrative Paradigm

The narrative paradigm is helpful in illuminating our natural compulsion to make sense of our lives and to connect emotionally through our roles as storytellers and listeners/readers. The NSCC affects this exercise when our speedy and incomplete communication affects our ability to construct coherent, comprehensive stories, as well as to affirm those stories that "ring true" to our own experience (Fisher, 1984, p.8) Ideally these stories communicate the nuances and subjective nature of our perspectives, which may then underscore a deeper, unique connection. A more extensive review of these elements occurs below.

Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm instructs that "humans are essentially storytellers" (p.7) and that we have a natural proclivity to make sense of our lives through those stories. Fisher (1984) believed that the connection to stories and the telling of stories honored an emotional component that is often overlooked in favor of more rational approaches to persuasion and communication. Recognizing the power of the emotional component within communicative interaction resonates with our argument advocating for the conscious inclusion of this aspect of our communication. Fisher believed that Mythos (narrative) and Pathos (emotion) are more meaningful than Logos (rational argument) (Dainton and Zelley, 2005). If this is the case, certainly the frequent absence of an emotional connection through language impacts the meaningfulness (or lack thereof) within our communication.

In addition to describing the motivation that we may feel to tell our stories and the emotional connection that is forged when we do so, Fisher (1984) also describes the sense-making that happens as a result and notes that "good reasons" (p.7) must inform our acceptance of the narratives we hear. These reasons are underscored by "narrative probability" which determines a coherent story and "narrative fidelity" whereby the stories heard "ring true" to the life experience of the listener/reader (Fisher, 1984, p.7). These inform the "rationality" of the communication exercise. The emphasis on perceived truthfulness, consistency, and coherence illuminates a problem with our current mode of discourse. When you are engaged in a communication exercise that emphasizes speed and accessibility, you may find that the aforementioned elements are sacrificed in your desire to accomplish communication quickly and efficiently.

Ideally there is an element of nuance to sense-making through storytelling, because our "values, emotions, [and] aesthetic preferences shape [our] beliefs and actions" (Dainton & Zelley, 2005, p.121), and we must "relay messages and experiences through stories as an attempt to capture these subjective experiences." These elements of subjectivity can be lost if we are not purposeful, or at least devote some amount of time and attention to the way that we communicate.

Fisher's paradigm echoes the ideas earlier explored with the symbolic interationists and offers further insight into the current dissatisfaction and alienation that many of us feel in our day to day interactions. If we are stifling our "narrative impulse" (Fisher, 1984, p.8) through our pared-down, speedy but incomplete communication style, and at the same time unable to read the "symbolic" language as part of our sensemaking process because the time and effort has not been permitted to adequately relay (and receive and process) this information, surely alienation and disconnection may result.

Consider the NSCC example of Twitter, or electronic notes that are limited to no more than 140 characters. Advocates argue that this instantaneous shorthand utilizes advancements in technology to "[perfect] human relationships, allowing us to interact more easily, understand one another more readily" (Pitts, 2009). But to many, the reality seems less than beneficial. Leonard Pitts (2009) writes:

> You have to wonder if, as communication becomes ever easier, we have not
> gone in the opposite direction, crossing the point of diminishing returns as we
> did. More people have more ways to reach more people than at any point in
> history. But it turns out . . . many of us don't have a whole lot to say . . .unless,

that is, you find some socially redeeming value in banality, cruelty and crudity,

which have become ubiquitous.

Pitts' assertion that many of us do not have a lot to say initially appears to go against the narrative paradigm, but what is important to acknowledge is that the means of communication, with its supposed benefits (speed, instantaneous – NSCC aspects) and limitations (size) and the expectations that those create are what result in a lack of meaningful connection through purposeful discourse. It is not that meaningful exchange is impossible on Twitter, its that Twitter as a communication concept does not value the meaningful exchange, therefore it is unlikely to be found there.

Ultimately, Fisher (1984) explains that "the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among . . . in a process of continual recreation" (p.8). Like the symbolic interactionists, the social construction of reality occurs through a sensemaking process that involves conscious selection and interpretation of language. When we lack a purposeful approach to our use of language, this may impact our ability to socially construct a satisfying reality.

The purposeful use of language to facilitate interpersonal sensemaking is illuminated through the narrative paradigm. Similarly, rhetorical theory explores the importance of powerful language to underscore emotional, meaningful connections. Below I examine rhetorical theory as related to purposeful discourse.

The Role of Rhetoric

Where symbolic interactionism provides a comprehensive back-drop for the social construction of reality through the selection, interpretation, and action through symbols (language) and the narrative paradigm explores our experience as storytelling creatures, rhetorical theory completes the mindful discourse puzzle. In the quest for meaningful interaction through mindful communication, the greatest tool in the communication toolbox may be language itself. Rhetoric reminds us that language is compelling, persuasive, emotional, often beautiful . . .and potentially powerful. Rhetoric can stoke individual emotions and can inspire the collective. While there may be a contemporary distrust of rhetoric, our contemporary communication reality suggests that a return to this traditional celebration of language, as instructed by centuries old scholars, may offer a practical and pleasing antidote to the NSCC. These ideas are further illuminated below.

Kirkwood (1992) notes the role of rhetoric "in expressing the shared values of a culture" (p.31). Besides reflecting shared values, rhetoric presents the potential to inspire both collectively and individually. However, the idea of using of rhetoric as a way to inject meaningful connection on a societal level is fraught with supposed contradiction: many view rhetoric itself as the absence of, or distraction from, meaningful or substantial discourse. A headline in *The Charlotte Observer* during the recent election compared "The Rhetoric and the Reality" of the two presidential candidates and borrowed a sneering line from *The New York Times*: "a political convention is a license if not to lie then at least to tell the truth creatively" (November 7, 2008).

This demonizing of the rhetorical situation is disappointing; in fact, considering the NSCC a "return to rhetoric" with its emphasis on the purposeful use of language and the passionate exchange of ideas through emotional discourse could facilitate connection and inspiration. Part of what is lost with the NSCC mentality is a real appreciation for, and embracing of, language. An emphasis on the selection and imagery of our words presents a useful way to reconcile that which has been lost, or least compromised, in our current communication. To embrace these aspects of rhetoric requires an intentional, purposeful, and strategic approach to language that is often absent in our modern communication.

Consider the example of Longinus, a "great teacher of philosophy and language in the third century, A.D." (Prickard, 1906, p.viii) whose translated work *On the Sublime* influenced the belletristic scholars in Britain. Longinus writes:

> . . . a choice of the right words and of grand words wonderfully attract and charms . . . this stands very high as a point of practice with . . .all writers, because . . .it brings greatness, beauty, raciness, weight, strength, mastery , and an exaltation all its own, to grace our words as though they were the fairest statues . . . For beautiful words are, in a real and special sense, the light of thought (Prickard, 1906, p.55).

This is a powerful example of purposeful language, described as "right words" that connect and compel; that paint a picture with beautiful language; and that instruct and inspire. Longinus' example clearly demonstrates the idea that "when a communicator unites profound ideas with strong emotion and nobility of phrase, he transports or lifts the audience" (Golden, Burquist & Coleman, 1976, p.108)

But not everyone is ready for take-off. Suspicion regarding the purposeful crafting of powerful language underscores a current propensity to reject it. But this compulsion ignores the great benefit that can come through the use of rhetoric. Wilson (2003) fashions a defense of rhetoric based on the admirable rhetorical acrobatics of Judge Noah Sweat, who argued both for and against prohibition by calling to question the very definition of the word "whiskey." Similarly, Wilson (2003) explains:

> If, when you say rhetoric, you mean windy effusions and empty promises . . .
>
> if you mean the lowest form of oratory . . . bigoted and incendiary speech that
>
> . . . dethrones reason; then, certainly, I am against it.
>
> But . . .if, when you say rhetoric . . . you mean the ability to render complex
>
> issues in a clear and simple language . . .to breathe poetry into policy . . .if
>
> you mean the gentle art of charming an audience and sending ripples of laughter
>
> through a crowded ballroom . . . if you mean powerful and passionate language
>
> that elevates the heart and frees the mind . . .well, then, certainly, I am
>
> for it (p.20).

It is this ability to inflame our human passions that begs us to revisit the use of rhetoric. The ability of language to resonate among us collectively resides in our soulful recognition of something that is good or true or yearned for within our minds and hearts. As Wilson (2003) notes, "the most memorable and enduring rhetoric both teaches and inspires . . .It draws inspiration of its own from the best instincts within the audience" (p.21). It also requires something of us, as craftsman and as audience: a willingness to pay attention to words – to use them magnificently and to feel them deeply. How great the impact upon a culture that collectively decides that it is better to craft a word– taking

time to savor its flavor and maximize its impact – rather than to react mindlessly and robotically to a million requests for our "split screen attention" (Conley, 2009, p.18).

In an interesting way, enduring and powerful language may provide much-needed moorings when a sea of postmodern abstraction threatens to sweep away our cultural lifeboats. Earlier in this paper I posed the question: *At the end of the day, in spite of all of our advances and our sophisticated evolution, do we need to have something we can hold in our hand—and if so, how is this need exacerbated by the virtual reality created through our constant use of technology*? Rhetorical theory presents an answer. Where our contemporary culture reflects an economy built upon "intangibles" (Conley, 2009), and technology obliterates boundaries that at once offer constraint but also definition, meaningful speech proves our humanity and at the same time transcends it. Words that inspire become immortal. They may be recorded and revisited year after year, embodying a physical presence on the page as well as an emotional place in our minds and hearts. As Wilson (2003) notes, "One still gets chills today reading the speeches of Lincoln, Churchill, and Martin Luther King" (p. 21).

And, tied to our earlier exploration to symbolic interactionism and narrative, it is worthwhile to conclude that "the best rhetoric is never just rhetoric. In overcoming doubts through strong argument and stirring the emotions through impassioned language, rhetoric sets the stage for action" (Wilson, 2003, p.22).

Symbolic interactionism, narrative, and rhetoric allow us to consciously craft language and through our purposeful interpretation of that symbol, to construct and to connect through a socially constructed reality. Below I examine how the theoretical

ideas previously explored are evident in a blogging exercise, and also how the NSCC threatens that communication community in the form of the anonymous poster.

Critical Conditions

Theory to Practice

When critically examining narrative blogs, often one finds the communication concepts previously illuminated through communication theory. The primary communication typically appears purposeful, intentional, and emotional on the part of the blog author as a way to tell a story and to connect with others. However, the nature of the online community bears some resemble to the NSCC regarding commitment. Specifically, the ability to fully participate in the communicative exercise yet remain anonymous reflects a lack of commitment on the part of many posters, who become influential members of the online community. In the end, a shift occurs where the great majority of the effort and purposeful action on the part of the blog author goes towards the manipulation of language and use of rhetoric to protect personal identity, instead of to connect in a more meaningful and perhaps, authentic, way. An exploration of the experience of writer Tracy Curtis who has authored a blog and a weekly newspaper column illuminates many of the theoretical ideas explored earlier as well as reveals some of these critical issues.

Tracy was asked to blog about being 40 and pregnant for Charlotte.com, an invitation that she explained made her feel that her story may be interesting to some and worth telling (T.Curtis, personal communication, October 30, 2006). Her decision to engage in this exercise reflects symbolic interactionism – in that she felt called to act based on social sensemaking regarding the story she had to tell. In addition, she

enjoyed the process of writing and was glad to have an opportunity to tell her story. This demonstrates the "narrative impulse" described in Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm. She notes the social aspect of the exercise saying that "often I wouldn't realize how funny something was until I started to write and explore it on the blog" (T. Curtis, personal communication, October 30, 2006).

Evidence of Tracy's desire to express a certain "role identity" from the start is apparent in her rhetorical style and her approach to her topic. Her blog is upbeat, funny, and light-hearted and presents a picture of pregnancy and motherhood in a most endearing light. When her "role support" for this performance was threatened, her writing changed. She notes, "I started to write sweeter, wittier, and never (intentionally) taking on a hot or controversial topic" (T. Curtis, personal communication, October 30, 2006). It is interesting to note that even in telling this most intimate story –truly one that only she could tell, of her experience as an expectant mother—she felt compelled to change her story or "performance" to appease her critics. Within this virtual environment, instead of purposefully crafting language that would be meaningful and authentic to the story she had to tell, a shift occurred such that she was purposeful in order to protect her role identity. Evidence of symbolic interationism in her conscious considerations and subsequent actions and of dramaturgy in her later performances reflects the usefulness of communication theory to understanding her experience.

Perhaps most compelling was her realization that not just her story-telling, but also her own sense of personal identity was impacted by the interactional nature of her online communication. She notes that "some comments [from blog readers] would make me feel like a trivial, trite, ridiculous rookie mom who shouldn't be procreating" and "I

flip-flopped between feeling smart and stupid, open and closed –off, able and incompetent." Regarding the ultimate impact upon her sense of self she observed that "One negative comment out of 50 positive comments could fill me with self-doubt" (T.Curtis, personal communication, October 30, 2006).

It is no wonder; some of the comments were extremely brutal. This was most often the case with anonymous posters – who made up the overwhelming majority of the online community posting in response to Tracy's blogs (of the posts studied in four of the blogs, 56 out of 86 comments were posted anonymously.[4]) One poster wrote this:

> You're not doing anything spectacular – get over yourself. The whole "being a mom is the hardest job in the world" thing is bunk. If it was that hard, nobody would do it. By the way, even animals with pea-sized brains create and sustain life. Breeding isn't really an accomplishment (*Stork Raving Mad*, December 21, 2005).

In the end, more than just the story or the performance was transformed – personal identity was clearly impacted as well during this online exercise. It would seem that this is a fairly common experience within online communities: they may take on a life of their own, and often through the dialogue that is posted anonymously (Jordan, 2005). The emergence of the active anonymous poster seems a reflection of the NSCC mentality: *I will give you a piece of my mind, in this instant, but I will not sign my name.* The commitment of the person engaging in the anonymous exercise is fleeting; the impact of his words, however, may be much more abiding.

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[4] Four entries and subsequent postings from *Stork Raving Mad* were studied for my Proseminar paper titled *Blogging, Narrative Performance, and the Social Construction of Identity Online*, submitted December 6, 2006.

For Tracy, this was an intense exercise. She reflects that "It was explained to me that blogs are meant to 'create communities' and 'get people talking.' But . . . because I was writing about my family and my pregnancy, I didn't think people should comment on such personal thoughts" (T. Curtis, personal communication, October 30, 2006). With the birth of her baby, Tracy ended the blog, but continued writing – for the newspaper. In this way, she was able to create and to connect, but without the negative influence of the anonymous community. She notes "Folks who read my column in the paper have to send an email, so they will be getting one back from me!" (T. Curtis, personal communication, March 17, 2009). It is interesting to note that in this new exercise, Tracy is able to utilize technology, but in a strategic, manageable way. The pervasive and unforeseen effects of participating in an always- on community are avoided without having to sacrifice the ability to connect and to create.

<div align="center">Log Off</div>

Columnist Leonard Pitts (2007) once wrote, "My goodness, what robots we have become . . . we already watch television in separate rooms. . . .Go about cocooned by iPod tunes. . . As if there was not enough in life to make you feel disconnected, disaffected, alienated, isolated." The dissatisfaction that many seem to feel in our contemporary culture seems connected to our turbulent work environments, the loss of boundaries in our professional and personal lives, and most importantly, the impact of technology upon our communication practices, and subsequently, upon our interpersonal relationships.

We cannot sit still. We constantly engage in "reflexive digital behavior" (Croal, 2008) that "[fills] the void with some sort of electronic activity." Although we may find

that what we are filling isn't a void . . . ideally it's an opportunity to connect with another human being, and we are missing the boat. A few weeks ago I listened to a program on social media on a local radio show, *Charlotte Talks*. As host Mike Collins interviewed two young experts on social media, he noted that during the entire live interview they were simultaneously texting on their handheld devices in the studio. "Don't worry, it doesn't bother me," he said "It just annoys the hell out of me" (*Charlotte Talks*, March 10, 2009).

I believe that we need to renegotiate the terms of our current communication contract! And I don't think I am the only one who feels this way. There is compelling evidence that people are yearning for a connection through language. Consider the recent presidential election, historic for many reasons, but also notable because "Obama's . . . message of hope and change inspired many voters . . .his way with words was a major factor in his winning the Democratic nomination" (Keedle, 2008, p.15) and later the White House. After an absence of eloquence from the national stage, people lost their minds over the beauty and passion of Obama's words.

It is not only at the height of adult power and prestige that powerful language is making a come-back. A recent study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project revealed that 85% of teens surveyed utilize some form of electronic personal communication, but 60% do not consider these electronic texts as "writing"—and, perhaps most importantly, 86% of those surveyed said that good writing is an important ingredient of success. An impressive 82% felt there should be additional focus on writing while at school (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith & Macgill, 2008).

So it seems that many of us are poised and ready for a change. Communication theory helps us to understand why we might desire one. Symbolic interactionism reveals the importance of "symbols [language] and shared meaning as the binding factors in society" (Littlejohn, 1977, p.85). Narrative theory describes our desire to connect through language, specifically as storytellers and listeners. Finally, rhetorical theory touches our individual hearts and our collective consciousness through the persuasive and emotional use of language.

After exploring these theories and examining the reality of the NSCC there seems to be enough to suggest that these ideas may be the Ritalin that our technology-induced attention deficit disorder requires. But in order for this medicine to work, we must commit to consciously change how we communicate with one another.

It seems, at the very least, that we could begin by being mindful and present in our interactions. As Eisenburg and Goodall (2004) observe, "mindful communication requires discipline and everyday practice . . .when we . . .decide to become more conscious of our interactions" (p.350). This may mean slowing down, and fully experiencing – in the most basic, and human way – our life and our relationships. As executive coach Mike Whitehead (2008) describes:

> Once, when we were discussing his family life, an executive proudly shared that
> he hadn't missed even one of his daughter's birthdays. In fact, he had
> personally videotaped the entire celebration, year after year. But further into
> the conversation, the man tearfully realized that he had been so busy recording
> the parties, he wasn't actually there with his daughter. What's more, it became

clear to him that for the first several birthdays of her life, she experienced her father as a giant camera lens, and little else.

In the end, the concept of connecting in a meaningful way through the purposeful use of language is meant to be an empowering exercise. We all have the ability to create a positive change: we have the choice to use or to not use the technology available to us, since often "devices that were supposed to make us more efficient and connected have actually made us more attention-deprived and anti-social" (Shelley, 2009). When we do utilize technology, we can decide to use it strategically. It may be that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Similarly, we constantly use language – the trick is only in how we do it. As Margaret Atwood (1981) noted, "A word after a word after a word is power."

I opened this paper with a passage from the Book of John in the Bible, referencing "the Word." As John prepares to instruct his Greek audience about the coming of Christ, he introduces the concept with "a title full of resonances in both Jewish and Greek cultures: the Word, *Logos*. . . The Word of the Lord was something living and active in the Old Testament from the creation when God had only to speak for things to come into existence" (Burridge, 2005, p.136). This resonates profoundly to me now, the idea (grossly simplified) that something powerful and divine exists through the living nature of language. Perhaps I should prayerfully consider how to move forward in my personal discourse in the hopes that I may be more purposeful, less distracted, better engaged.

Yet, in the end, this paper is less like a prayer than a love letter (how apropos – another endangered artifact) to all that has had meaning and impact for me in my

studies in organizational communication. A new respect for language and a passion for writing are illuminated through the theories that I have studied and embraced.

And so they lived happily ever after. The End.

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