Pragmatism in the Field of Communication Theory

Robert T. Craig

Department of Communication
University of Colorado at Boulder
270 UCB
Boulder, CO 80304
Robert.Craig@Colorado.edu

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Abstract

This paper reconsiders Craig’s (1999) constitutive metamodel of communication theory in light of Russill’s (2004, 2005) critique and proposal of a pragmatist tradition of communication theory. Beginning with a review of the constitutive metamodel and early responses to it, the paper goes on to examine Russill’s argument and assess its implications for a reconstructed field of communication theory including pragmatism as a distinct tradition. I argue, in conclusion, that the problems of pluralistic community in the field of communication theory are not unconnected to the corresponding problems in society generally.
Pragmatism in the Field of Communication Theory

A constitutive metamodel situates communication theory within the societal communication process that constitutes and regulates communication as a social practice. The point is to see communication itself as a socially constructed practice and communication theory as a practical way of participating in a societal discourse about the norms of that practice (Craig, 2006). A constitutive metamodel begins with a first-order constitutive model of communication but “puts the constitutive model through a reflexive turn from which it emerges looking quite different” (Craig, 1999, p. 124).

A first-order constitutive model of communication posits that communication, rather than merely a neutral conduit for transmitting independently existing information, is the primary social process through which our meaningful common world is constructed. Carey (1989) and Deetz (1994) exemplify different ways of formulating a constitutive model. Carey defined communication as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (1989, p. 23). Deetz characterized the focus of communication study as a process in which “the inner world, outer world, social relations, and means of expression are reciprocally constituted” (1994, p. 577). The constitutive property of communication is understood in terms of different conceptual metaphors in the two theories. Carey understands the constitutive property of communication in terms of ritual, whereas Deetz understands it in terms of negotiation. Carey’s metaphor of ritual emphasizes the cultural aspect of communication. For Carey, we ideally constitute a common world by participating in the rituals of a shared culture. Deetz’s metaphor of negotiation emphasizes the political aspect of communication. For Deetz, we ideally constitute a shared world by negotiating our differences in a free and open discourse. Despite this important difference in emphasis, both formulations imply a close practical tie
between communication, if properly understood as a constitutive process, and democratic participation. Both critique the traditional linear transmission model of communication with regard to questionable social practices and relations of power that it bolsters and distracts attention from. Both understand communication theory as a critical, reflexive project that by re-describing communication in particular ways potentially informs the practice of communication in those ways. In Carey’s words, every model of communication is also a model for communication (1989, see pp. 29-35).

From a meta-level constitutive point of view, therefore, the debate about communication theory is a debate about the practical implications of constituting communication itself in different ways. There is no absolute reality of “communication” (regarded as a social practice rather than a sheer biological/behavioral phenomenon) apart from how it is intersubjectively constituted in discourse. The constitutive model paradoxically implies that the constitutive model itself is one among many possible models of and for communication, none of which is absolutely true or false (which is not to say that all are equally useful). All theories of communication, including theories that do not posit first-order models of communication as a constitutive process, are nevertheless potentially constitutive of communication. Every theory offers a particular way of constituting the process of communication from some practically oriented point of view. A linear transmission (source-message-receiver) model of communication, for example, constructs the process in a particular way that reflects a practical orientation to problems such as quantity and accuracy of information, and causal impact of messages. From a meta-level constitutive point of view, that way of constructing the process cannot be ruled out a priori even though it ignores, and in some formulations contradicts, the constitutive property of communication. Carey and Deetz, among many others, have criticized the
transmission model for good reasons; however, it is not absolutely wrong and is, in fact, widely regarded as a useful way of talking about communication for some purposes (Craig, 1999, see p. 155, note 13).

The constitutive metamodel thus implies a reflexive paradox: it cannot a priori reject first-order models of communication that contradict its own assumptions without thereby contradicting those very assumptions. This is not good reason to reject it, however. Bateson (1972) showed that all communication involves similar reflexive paradoxes, which can be explained, but never actually resolved, by the theory of logical types (Craig, 2001, see p. 233). Just as we are able to communicate in practice despite the reflexive paradoxes inherent in doing so, we can practice communication theory (itself a form of communication about communication) according to the constitutive metamodel despite the reflexive paradox, not as a matter of logical necessity but as a useful way of constituting communication theory as a coherent field (Craig, 1999, 2001).

The constitutive metamodel is useful because it gives the vast, otherwise disparate array of communication theories a common practical purpose: to illuminate, challenge, and enrich everyday ways of talking about communication problems and practices (Craig, 2005). As formulated by Craig (1999), the constitutive metamodel constructs a coherent field by interpreting the various theories of communication as alternative ways of constituting communication in discourse for practical purposes. Within the constitutive metamodel, communication theory thus becomes:

… a coherent field of metadiscursive practice, a field of discourse about discourse with implications for the practice of communication. The various traditions of communication theory each offer distinct ways of conceptualizing and discussing communication problems and practices.
These ways derive from and appeal to certain commonplace beliefs about communication while problematizing other beliefs. It is in the dialogue among these traditions that communication theory can fully engage with the ongoing practical discourse (or metadiscourse) about communication in society. (Craig, 1999, p. 120)

As a device for “jump-starting” that theoretical dialogue and suggesting what it might look like, Craig (1999) proposed a matrix representation of the field comprising seven “traditions” of communication theory: rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, and critical. Each tradition is characterized by a unique definition of communication, conceptualization of communication problems, metadiscursive vocabulary (terms for talking about communication), and “metadiscursive commonplaces” or everyday assumptions about communication that it either appeals to (thus showing its practical plausibility) or challenges (thus showing that it has interesting if sometimes implausible things to say about communication). The second part of the matrix contains rhetorical topoi (lines of argument) for discourse across the seven traditions, indicating how they tend to disagree in their approach to practical problems. For example, the semiotic tradition characteristically defines communication as intersubjective mediation by signs, conceptualizes communication problems as gaps between subjective viewpoints, uses a distinctive vocabulary (sign, symbol, icon, medium, etc.), appeals to commonplace beliefs such as the need for a common language, and challenges commonplace beliefs such as the idea that words have correct meanings. Semiotic theory challenges other theoretical traditions, often by reinterpreting their core phenomena in terms of sign systems (e.g., the “ego” and “other” of phenomenology become “subject positions” in a semiotic system) and is, in turn, challenged by internal criticism as well as criticism from other traditions.
(e.g., phenomenology challenges the commonplace semiotic distinction between signifier and signified).

The seven-traditions matrix should not be confused with the field it represents. It was explicitly proposed as an illustration convenient for certain purposes—an interpretive model of and for the field. It displays not eternal ideal types but “traditions” of thought that have evolved historically and presumably will continue to evolve, recombine, and redivide along different lines of cleavage. Rhetorical theory today is not what it was two thousand years ago. Poststructuralism is a hybrid, primarily of semiotics and phenomenology that may arguably be regarded as a new tradition in its own right. Other new traditions are possible, and Craig (1999) discussed several likely candidates such as feminist, spiritual, and economic. The only restrictions on including any new tradition in the framework of the constitutive metamodel are that the proposed tradition must contribute a unique conceptualization of communication, significantly different from other traditions, and that it must be incorporated into the matrix of the field by specifying its view of communication problems, metadiscursive vocabulary, commonplace beliefs it affirms or challenges, and topoi for argumentation vis-à-vis other traditions. Incorporating a new tradition requires that other traditions be redefined at least to the extent that each of them has something to say (argumentative topoi) about the new tradition and possibly in more radical ways.

Early Reception of the Metamodel

The constitutive metamodel, although soon adapted and used to varying degrees as an integrative framework in leading communication theory textbooks (e.g., Griffin, 2006; Littlejohn & Foss, 2005; Miller, 2005), has not been widely discussed in the primary scholarly literature. Prior to Russill’s (2004, 2005) recent comments, which are reviewed
in detail in the following sections, the only notable discussion I am aware of was in an exchange between Myers (2001) and Craig (2001).

Myers (2001) made two main arguments against the constitutive metamodel. First, he argued that the distinction between the constitutive metamodel and first-order models is self-contradictory and misleading. Rather than providing a neutral framework for debate in the field, Myers claimed, the metamodel actually represents an attempt to impose social constructionism as a grand unified theory that assimilates all other theories, “animating the hollow bodies of those theories while depriving them of their paradigmatic souls” (2001, p. 221). Second, Myers argued that the constitutive metamodel provides no truth criterion by which to reject false theories, thus turning the field into a “Mad Hatter’s tea party” that “well may allow all to participate in this party of discourse” but “seems particularly ill-suited to inform any of the participants when it is time to leave” (2001, p. 226). In reply, Craig (2001) argued, first, that the constitutive metamodel does not attempt to reduce all theories to versions of a first-order constitutive model but only provides a common ground for discussing all theories with regard to their practical implications, and second, that models of communication are not absolutely true or false but that the constitutive metamodel does not rule out the use of an empirical truth criterion as one among other practically relevant criteria for evaluating particular theoretical claims.

The apparent absence of any further scholarly discussion of Craig’s proposal may indicate that Myers scored a knockdown victory in their exchange, convincing everyone in the field that the proposal is simply without merit. More likely, in my view, it indicates the continuing non-existence of a field of communication theory, and therefore a general lack of interest in discussing the underlying constitution of such a field beyond the brave cohort
of general textbook writers who can hardly avoid the issue. In the primary scholarly literature, the problem that Craig (1999) sought to overcome apparently continues:

Rather than addressing a field of theory, we appear to be operating primarily in separate domains. Books and articles on communication theory seldom mention other works on communication theory except within narrow (inter)disciplinary specialties and schools of thought. Except within these little groups, communication theorists apparently neither agree nor disagree about much of anything. There is no canon of general theory to which they all refer. There are no common goals that unite them, no contentious issues that divide them. For the most part, they simply ignore each other. (Craig, 1999, pp. 119-120)

Recent work by Russill (2004, 2005) – to my knowledge, only the second substantial response to Craig’s proposal in the scholarly literature – is, therefore, deserving of careful attention.

**Russill’s Case for a Pragmatist Tradition**

Chris Russill’s (2004) doctoral dissertation is not primarily about the constitutive metamodel. Rather, it primarily aims to resuscitate and reconstruct John Dewey’s (1927) theory of the public as a pragmatist theory of democratic communication updated with reference to the work of James Carey and, interestingly, Michel Foucault, among others. In pursuit of that project, it situates Dewey’s theory of the public within a distinct pragmatist tradition of communication theory defined according to “Craig’s (1999) rules for introducing new traditions of communication theory” (Russill, 2002, p. 281).

Although, as I will show, Russill does not entirely follow “Craig’s rules,” he does define a pragmatist tradition in terms of a distinctive way of framing the problem of
communication and articulates premises that make the tradition theoretically and practically plausible. Implicitly, he also articulates premises that make pragmatism interesting by showing how it challenges other theories including those of Walter Lippmann, James Taylor, and Jürgen Habermas. He thus goes at least part way toward defining a position for pragmatism within the constitutive metamodel’s matrix of theoretical traditions. He shows that pragmatism has a particular action orientation and evaluates it in terms of its usefulness as a response to critical practical problems of democratic community. Along the way, he has interesting things to say about the pervasive yet oddly veiled presence of pragmatism in Craig’s (1999) interpretation of the field. After briefly summarizing the most relevant aspects of Russill’s argument in this section, in the following section I reflect on pragmatism as a tradition and its implications for the constitutive metamodel.

Russill (2004, 2005) traces a distinct pragmatist tradition of communication theory from the emergence of the problem of incommensurability in the radical empiricism of William James (1912/1996), through Dewey’s (1927) theory of the public, to recent work in communication and cultural studies that, he argues, has misunderstood pragmatism and needs to reclaim the tradition. Essentially, in Russill’s interpretation, the pragmatist tradition conceptualizes communication as a response to the problem of incommensurability. Responding to this problem and building on James’s pluralism and Mead’s interactionism, Dewey’s transactional theory of communication “introduces a higher degree of contingency into the theorization of communication processes beyond that generally accommodated by interactionist theories of communication” (Russill, 2004, pp. 70-71). What Russill refers to as the “triple contingency” of Dewey’s communication theory (2004, p. 98) developed in conjunction with both Dewey’s theory of the public and
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his theory of inquiry, and the key problems that the pragmatist tradition, for Russill, must now urgently address are those that arise from Dewey’s vision of a democratic public that “will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (Dewey, 1927, p. 184). Russill (2004, 2005) further elaborates on this tradition and its implications for contemporary thought. Here we can only briefly touch on the concepts of incommensurability and triple contingency before returning to the question of defining a pragmatist tradition in terms of the constitutive metamodel.

James’s radical empiricism stemmed from a critique of Locke’s empiricist epistemology. Locke believed that knowledge derives from sensory experience as interpreted and organized by innate rational faculties of the mind. Rejecting this rationalistic aspect of Locke’s epistemology and the implicated mind-matter dualism, James concluded that all knowledge, not only of things but also of the relations among things, comes directly from lived experience. The implications of this radical empiricism for communication center on the problem of how two minds can know the “same” thing. For Locke, communication in this sense was possible insofar as we properly form our ideas of the same empirical world through the same rational faculties. For James, “sameness” became a radically temporal and perspectival process. There can be no metaphysical sameness of things but only temporary conjunctions among incommensurable perspectives in the flow of experience as we interact with the world. As Russill puts it,

How can two minds know one thing? For James, to say that any two thoughts or things are strictly identical is nonsense (in the sense of silly) and to say that any one thought or thing is identical to itself is nonsensical (in the sense of saying nothing at all). The question only arises as a
significant philosophical concern if the functional distinction between subject-object is mistaken for an ontological dualism that must be definitively bridged. But such concerns, when they arise, are practical problems of coordinating our activities in the world rather than apprehending a rational foundation upon which our activities take place. (2005, pp. 289-290)

James, according to Russill, was “not so much concerned with giving us a practical account of the processes through which samenesses are made. In fact, his account is only satisfactorily taken up in George Herbert Mead’s subsequent theory of communication, developed between 1909 and 1912” (2005, p. 285). Mead’s *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) is now the most widely cited source for his theory of the formation of mind, self, and society in symbolic interaction, but it is important to realize that Mead’s work on communication was already well known, followed, and built upon by Dewey in *Experience and Nature* (1929, first published in 1925) and *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), both major works in which Dewey’s theory of communication was formulated (see Simonson, 2001, pp. 8-9).

A critical element in Dewey’s theory for Russill is a *triple contingency* that fully situates communication in James’s indeterminate, pluralistic universe. In terms of communication models, single contingency can be represented by a linear (A→B) model in which A contingently selects a message to influence B. Double contingency can be represented by an interactionist (A↔B) model in which A’s and B’s incommensurable perspectives jointly determine the message (a moment of relative sameness). Triple contingency introduces a third contingent perspective that forms the context in which A and B must interact. The third perspective is represented in Dewey’s theory by a pluralistic
public comprising incommensurable group interests. The interaction of A and B is contingent on their reflexive awareness of the actions and interests of various nonpresent others who constitute the public. Inquiry (investigation of consequences) is needed to inform that reflexive social awareness. “Acting intelligently, on the basis of consequences of habitual and prospective actions, creates a standpoint of action that is neither ego’s nor alter’s but a third perspective” (Russill, 2004, p. 105). Communication in society depends critically on Dewey’s vision of a democratic public or pluralistic community as a context for cooperative interaction across incommensurable perspectives. To make a long story short, Russill (2004) goes on to argue that contemporary theorists have attempted in various ways to avoid this triple contingency, but that an adequate theory of communication must embrace it fully while turning to Foucault (read as a crypto-pragmatist) for critical tools to assist investigations of the role of power in democratic processes of social inquiry and communication.

Russill’s summary of the pragmatist tradition according to “Craig’s rules” includes, then, “a problem formulation (James on incommensurability), an initial vocabulary (democracy, publics, power, criticism, response-ability, triple contingency), and arguments for the plausibility of this viewpoint in relation to prevailing traditions of theory” (2004, p. 281).

Why has pragmatism—the massive eighth planet of communication theory—been discovered only now? Russill argues that James’s and Dewey’s relevant theories have never been laid out in full but must both be reconstructed from fragments.

The problem is that pragmatism has neither been adequately elaborated nor thoroughly ignored. It has been available to communication scholars through many of the other traditions arrayed in Craig's disciplinary matrix:
the critical, the socio-cultural, the semiotic, and, to a lesser extent, the phenomenological and social-psychological. Yet it wrestles with a distinctive and clearly stated problem, or set of problems, which has been intermittently recognized, but hardly followed up in more systematic fashion: the problem of incommensurabilism in modern democratic and pluralistic societies. (Russill, 2004, p. 32)

Craig (1999) deservedly takes some heat for failing to clarify how pragmatism has informed his own metamodel for inter-theoretic communication in the field while making “only cursory and uninspiring mention of a genuinely pragmatist tradition” (Russill, 2005, p. 296). Pragmatism is not recognized as a tradition within the field, yet the constitutive metamodel, Russill writes,

… is, quite explicitly, a proposal for tackling the problem of incommensurability: that is, the problem of facilitating dialogue, argumentation and criticism among different conceptual vocabularies as derived from differing practices in different interests … Craig’s radical pragmatic turn, then, is to evaluate theories with regard to the practical implications and actual consequences to result from envisioning communication in various forms. (Russill, 2004, pp. 27-28)

Implications: Reconsidering the Metamodel

Having been “outed” in this fashion, the constitutive metamodel must now be reconsidered with regard to both the place of pragmatism as a tradition in the field and its role in the metamodel itself.

Pragmatism in the Dialogical-Dialectical Matrix
Russill (2004) makes a strong case for a distinct pragmatist tradition in communication theory. However, in reconstructing the tradition he explicitly fills only a few of the relevant cells that would need to be added to Craig’s Tables 1 and 2 (1999, pp. 133-134), and in that sense follows “Craig’s rules” only in part. He articulates a distinct conceptualization of communication in terms of triple contingency and pluralistic community and a distinct conceptualization of communication problems in terms of incommensurability. He sketches a metadiscursive vocabulary and discusses the social relevance of pragmatism but not explicitly in terms of metadiscursive commonplaces. He critiques various other theories from the pragmatist standpoint but without systematically commenting on the other seven traditions. Most importantly, he neglects to consider a full range of topoi for arguments against pragmatism from the traditions of communication theory, including those all-important topoi for self-criticism of pragmatism from a pragmatist point of view. He points out the pervasive influence of pragmatism on several other traditions but does not consider how those traditions might repolarize around different issues and need to be redefined as a distinct pragmatist position is parsed out. Table 1 and the following discussion provide additional details for a tentative reconstruction of pragmatism as a new tradition of communication theory in Craig’s (1999) format.

Table 1 elaborates somewhat on Russill’s (2004) essential elements of the pragmatist tradition. The conceptualization of communication highlights practices oriented to the achievement of pluralistic community. Problems of communication extend beyond
incommensurability per se to include conditions that presumably tend to work against pluralistic community, such as nonparticipation, nonreflexivity or dogmatism, and dysfunctional discourse practices. Metadiscursive vocabulary is expanded to include a cluster of terms that refer in common usage to forms of coordinated communication. Metadiscursive commonplaces are formulated to translate pragmatism in terms of everyday beliefs about communication that render the tradition both plausible (consistent with metadiscursive commonplaces) and interesting (challenging of metadiscursive commonplaces). The overarching practical issue that emerges seems to be that of “pragmatic” getting along despite differences versus a principled refusal to compromise on fundamental commitments and matters of belief.

Pragmatism’s “column” (referring to the column that would represent pragmatism when added to Table 2 in Craig, 1999) suggests stock lines of argument that capture objections characteristically raised within the pragmatist tradition against other ways of theorizing communication. A common theme that runs through most of the arguments has to do with the various ways that other theoretical traditions attempt to restrict the triple contingency of communication, thereby limiting reflexivity through: appeals to traditional beliefs (rhetoric), structured codes (semiotics), dialogical focus on the other (phenomenology), formal models (cybernetics), causal predictions (social psychology), persistent cultural patterns and social structures (sociocultural theory), and universal validity claims (Habermasian critical theory).

Pragmatism’s self-criticisms (the intersection of pragmatism’s “column” and “row”), however, require us to admit the practical downside of seeing contingency all the way down. Pragmatism cannot be realized in practice on the scale of society without forming institutions that inevitably routinize and ritualize practices of inquiry and
communication, thereby reducing contingency (the always-temporary goal of inquiry) while rendering them nonreflexive (which inhibits inquiry). Creativity, critical thinking, and reflexivity cannot be reduced to rule or routine. Any “institution” of pragmatism within society must constantly struggle with this dilemma.

The other pragmatist self-criticism follows from the ideal of pluralistic community, which tends to force pragmatism itself into the paradoxical position of a “neutral” proponent of pluralistic community “meta” to the particular array of interests that constitute a given community, despite its denial in principle of the possibility of taking such a neutral position. This reflexive paradox makes the standpoint of pragmatism notoriously difficult to pin down in practice, however strongly it may assert itself as a “practical” tradition.

The remainder of Table 1 (pragmatism’s “row” with reference, again, to Table 2 in Craig, 1999) suggests lines of argument against pragmatism emanating from other traditions. Here the criticisms are more various, reflecting in part the different practical ways in which other traditions tend to reduce the contingency that pragmatism prefers to uphold as a matter of principle.

Issues between pragmatism and other traditions cannot be fully explored within the bounds of this paper. Nor is it possible to examine in depth how other traditions might need to be redefined or the field as a whole reconfigured as a consequence of theorizing a pragmatist tradition. As Russill points out, pragmatism has been a major influence on most, if not all, of the other traditions. The particular way that each tradition reduces contingency can always be reconstructed as merely useful for some purposes, thus assimilating the tradition to pragmatism. Articulating pragmatism as a distinct tradition tends to highlight the existing tensions between pragmatist and nonpragmatist strains.
within each of the other tradition, opening new possibilities for dialogue and debate across the field. For example, in the sociocultural tradition the debate with pragmatism occurs internally as a debate between macro-social theories and the pragmatism-influenced interactionism stemming from the Chicago School; but the “new” tradition of pragmatism reveals, according to Russill, that much of the interactionist theory assumes only double contingency. The addition of pragmatism to the matrix also raises a question about the coherence and distinctiveness of a critical tradition defined in terms of “discursive reflection.” Conflict theory perhaps rises in prominence, possibly at the expense of Habermas’s pragmatist-influenced theory of communicative action and discursive reflection. Russill’s reconstruction of pragmatism already responds to critical theory in accounting for “the politics of the process, the relations of power, the interests and purposes served in formulating communication one way or another” (2004, pp. 173-174). The points of tension between this version of pragmatism and other strands of the critical tradition remain to be clarified.

This “playing around” with traditions—considering possible redefinitions as pragmatism enters the field—is not a pointless intellectual game. In fashioning the matrix we are fashioning a tool for reflection, trying to capture differences that cut across a broad range of communication theories—differences that make a difference for the practice of communication. Yet, we must also keep in mind that the matrix is at best a simplified heuristic device for thinking about the field as a whole. Only a small part of the field’s actual work can address this level of analysis.

Pragmatism in the Constitutive Metamodel

Is the constitutive metamodel essentially pragmatist, as Russill suggests? Yes, in many respects, but not purely (were there such a thing as “pure” pragmatism). Yes, the
metamodel has a generally pragmatist outlook and incorporates particular elements of pragmatism, including, for example, the interpretation of theories in terms of their practical orientations and the substitution of usefulness for truth as a fundamental criterion that subsumes truth although with other practical considerations. Russill’s definition of the pragmatist tradition also sheds important light on the role of pragmatism in the metamodel. Yes, it is true: the metamodel is fundamentally about overcoming incommensurability and enabling communication across different standpoints in the field. From this point of view, the metamodel is squarely in Russill’s pragmatist tradition. Was Myers (2001) therefore correct in charging that the metamodel is a veiled attempt for one grand theory to dominate the field?

The metamodel is not based exclusively on pragmatism. In fact, it incorporates elements of every tradition in the theoretical matrix. This is necessarily so, because in order to construct the matrix was necessary to extract from every tradition and formulate some relatively cogent view of communication to be incorporated into the matrix as a representation of that tradition. Because the matrix (via the topoi for argumentation) requires every tradition to have something interesting to say about every other tradition, every tradition also pervades the matrix dialectically in the form of arguments vis-à-vis other traditions. The matrix specifies the metamodel, every tradition participates in the metamodel, therefore the metamodel effectively includes all traditions insofar as they have something to say to the field (which, after all, is what defines a tradition in this scheme).

In addition to this generalized sense in which the metatheory is based on all first-order theories as a matter of principle, it is also the case that the particular structure of the metamodel as articulated by Craig (1999) draws substantively from every tradition, although—and this becomes an important point—it clearly draws more heavily from some
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Traditions than others. From rhetorical theory comes the idea of structuring the field as a system of definitions, commonplaces, and topoi for argumentation across theoretical traditions. Indeed the very concept of theory-as-discourse is implicitly rhetorical, and so is the idea that applying a theory means to use it as a resource for inventing arguments about what to do in particular situations. The key concept of metadiscourse comes from the semiotic tradition (discourse pragmatics), and the theoretical matrix with its structural contrasts among traditions and its purpose of making traditions of thought intelligible to each other is semiotically inspired. From phenomenology comes the ontology that underlies constitutive models of communication and, as well, the idea of dialogue. From cybernetics comes the critical distinction between metamodel and first-order models, and the idea that the field has a fractal structure (each tradition appearing as a set of interacting traditions when examined in finer grain). Even the number of traditions (seven) is based on a cybernetic principle of information processing—“the magical number seven, plus or minus two” (Miller, 1956)—that equally operates as a principle of social psychology. In proposing that communication theory as a field is defined by its orientation to commonplace problems and beliefs arising in the everyday lifeworld, its orientation to social problems, and in its generally social constructionist approach, the metatmodel draws from the tradition of sociocultural theory. And, finally, in its dialectical aspects and its orientation to critical reflection on communication practices in society, it is informed by the critical tradition.

Although the constitutive metamodel both essentially includes and substantially applies elements of all traditions, it admittedly favors some traditions over others. Specifically, as Myers (2001) indicated, it favors more “constitutive” traditions or traditions in which communication is more widely conceptualized as a constitutive
process. Pragmatism (having been added to the field) is clearly one such tradition; but pragmatism is not the only first-order tradition that has produced first-order constitutive models of communication. Rhetoric, semiotics, phenomenology, sociocultural and critical theories all provide particular ways of modeling communication as a constitutive process and are, accordingly, the most heavily emphasized traditions. But even cybernetics (in “second-order” cybernetics and theories of self-organizing systems) and social psychology (in discursive psychology and other lines of work that emphasize emergent group or relational phenomena) have strains that converge toward constitutive models of communication. The metamodel is most obviously compatible with those strains.

The significance of this admitted bias in Craig’s (1999) metamodel is that we communication theorists really do need to have a debate about the constitution of the field, a debate premised on the shared, self-fulfilling assumption that we want to have a field. The unavoidable fact of bias in any metamodel highlights Russil’s interesting observation that, from a political point of view, theoretical traditions within the metamodel become like interest groups (2004, p. 282). Presumably, each tradition, in good interest group politics fashion, might argue for a version of the metamodel in something that resembles its own image. A cybernetically oriented metamodel might represent the field as a structure of information and the traditions as networks characterized by density of connections and feedback loops. A sociopsychologically oriented metamodel might represent the field as an interacting social group characterized by specific cognitive processes, emotions, and group dynamics that threaten rationality. The practical implications of such alternative metamodels are worthy of discussion.

A key point is that there can be no neutral metamodel. In that regard, the dilemmas and paradoxes of pluralistic community in the field of communication resemble the
corresponding problems faced by pragmatism as a first-order theory (Table 1). Moving pragmatism to the meta-level does not allow a clean escape from the burden of theoretical positioning and argumentation. Craig’s constitutive metamodel now must openly admit that it is a largely a pragmatist project rather closely aligned with a first-order pragmatist theory of communication, although it also includes and welcomes dialogue with other, incommensurable theories.

If there can be no neutral metamodel, neither can there be a fixed, unchanging metamodel, for the field is dynamic and the metamodel as a model of and for the field must change along with it (sometimes leading the change, more often following). However constituted, a metamodel that attempts to include all traditions of communication theory will face the problem of incommensurability and, while benefiting from relevant insights from all traditions, will internalize the tensions within and among all traditions, which will surface in the theoretical dialogue as contradictions and interpretive disputes. In this regard, the field of communication theory is much like any pluralistic community.

**Conclusion**

What, then, is Craig’s political project? Having admitted that there can be no neutral metamodel, must he embraced a political project to avoid inconsistency? The explicit political project of the constitutive metamodel has had to do with the politics of the academic field of communication: asserting the possibility of a discipline based on a distinct, relatively coherent field of theory, that such a discipline has important intellectual and social contributions to offer, that all practically relevant theoretical standpoints should have “voice” in the field of communication theory, and that every one of those standpoints is subject to criticism and challenge from every standpoint in the field. It is indeed a
political vision of pluralistic community among incommensurables based on participative communication and inquiry, much like Dewey’s theory of the public. Thanks to Russill, this is now apparent.

Is there any reason to think that the model is less applicable to an academic discipline than to publics in general? Russill appears to question this in the conclusion of his dissertation when he points out:

The accompanying attitude or disposition, however, cannot be live and let live, such that theories simply proliferate and compete in the market place via a sort of academic interest group politics. However much we admire and are comfortable with the virtues of tolerance and civility, they cannot be allowed to supplant criticism and evaluation. (2004, p. 282)

This is quite correct and applies as well to the public sphere as it does to the more narrowly circumscribed discourse of an academic discipline. As members of a public or a disciplinary community, we always act at two levels, a first-order level at which we assert our own political/intellectual point of view and a “meta” level at which we assert norms to govern processes of participation and inquiry involving all points of view. As a civil libertarian, one asserts at the meta-level that political points of view that one hates, nevertheless have the right to be heard, while at the first-order level one may argue vigorously against those very same, hated points of view. The deeply paradoxical implications of this liberal stance in politics have been well exposed by Peters (2005). It is not apparent to me why something of the same logic (with the same resulting paradoxes) would not apply to an academic discipline. It is an unavoidable fact that advocates of particular theories often constitute interest groups, and that disciplinary inquiry has an element of interest group politics with groups vying for convention and journal space,
curricular prominence, and so on. The political process of the discipline undoubtedly
distorts inquiry in some ways, but more fundamentally it enables inquiry by allocating
access to an institutional infrastructure that is necessary for sustained scholarly work.
Participation is necessary in an academic discipline no less than in the public sphere, and,
in the same Deweyan spirit, inquiry is necessary in the public sphere no less than in the
academy (although certain ratios may differ). An advocate for the constitutive metamodel
in communication theory might naturally also advocate pragmatism as a first-order model
of communication while welcoming criticism and advocating a voice for all theoretical
points of view at the meta-level.

Returning, then, from problems of the discipline to those of society, Russill’s
argument reveals that the project of communication theory under a constitutive
metamodel, as a pragmatist enterprise, entails a political program broadly aligned with
Dewey’s pragmatist ideal: to create the social conditions in which progressively more
inclusive, participative, critically reflexive communication practices can flourish. However,
I continue to think that the scope of this project, the complexity of the tasks involved, and
the range of different views that may usefully engage in dialogue about it—the pluralistic
community of the field—all exceed what Russill has envisioned to date in his nonetheless
brilliant, indeed essential contribution to theorizing a pragmatist tradition.
References


Table 1. Pragmatism in the Field of Communication Theory (a tentative reconstruction).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential Elements</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication theorized as:</td>
<td>Pluralistic community; coordination of practical activities through discourse and reflexive inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems of communication theorized as:</td>
<td>Incommensurability, triple contingency, nonparticipation, nonreflexivity or dogmatism, defective discourse practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metadiscursive vocabulary such as:</td>
<td>Practices, discourse, pluralism, responsibility perspective, reflection, criticism, interest, purpose, consequences, cooperation, collaboration, community, participation, interaction, interdependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plausible when appeals to metadiscursive commonplaces such as:</td>
<td>We need to cooperate despite our differences; everyone has their own point of view and deserves an equal hearing; the real meaning of anything is the practical difference it makes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting when challenges metadiscursive commonplaces such as:</td>
<td>There are certain truths that cannot be denied; some differences are so fundamental there is no way to overcome them; there can be no cooperation with evil or falsehood (“a pox on all compromises”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Topoi for Argumentation From Pragmatism (pragmatism’s “column”)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Against Rhetoric:</th>
<th>Rhetoric relies on traditional commonplaces, defeats reflexivity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Against Semiotics:</td>
<td>Intersubjective mediation occurs in coordinated practical activities, not through signs alone; meaning emerges through interaction and is triply contingent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against Phenomenology:</td>
<td>Experience of the other means taking the perspective of the other in interaction; I-Thou depends on Us/Them (triple contingency); communication should be judged by its consequences, not its “authenticity”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against Cybernetics:</td>
<td>“Contingency goes all the way down” (Russill, 2004, p. 173), so communication cannot be adequately rendered in formal models of information processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against Sociopsychology:</td>
<td>“Contingency goes all the way down,” so consequences for practical action cannot be reduced to any particular set of predictable effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against Sociocultural Theory:</td>
<td>Stable cultural patterns and social structures as a basis for communication assume only double contingency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against Critical Theory:</td>
<td>“Contingency goes all the way down,” so there can be no universal validity claims; identity differences and social conflict do not preclude efforts to extend pluralistic community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Against Pragmatism: | *Dilemma of reflexivity*: inquiry, when instituted (routinized/ritualized) as social practices, becomes nonreflexive  
*Paradox of pluralism*: a standpoint that can take no particular standpoint |
<p>| <strong>Topoi for Argumentation Against Pragmatism (pragmatism’s “row”)</strong> |  |
| From Rhetoric: | Pragmatism lacks the specificity of an art; pluralistic community is merely an intellectual ideal |
| From Semiotics: | Coordination depends on a shared code; community is constituted symbolically |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From Phenomenology:</th>
<th>Experience of the other with an eye to consequences is not a genuine experience of the other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From Cybernetics:</td>
<td>Pragmatism overestimates agency, underestimates the degree to which the determinism of complex systems can be captured by formal models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Sociopsychology:</td>
<td>Pragmatic consequences are most usefully assessed through rigorous empirical procedures; “there is nothing so practical as a good theory”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Sociocultural Theory:</td>
<td>Pragmatism overestimates agency, underestimates the profound influence and persistence of cultural patterns and social structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Critical Theory:</td>
<td>Pragmatism inadequately accounts for relations of power, systematic distortion; differences are negotiated in political struggle: not coordination but reclaiming conflict is the object of critical praxis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Pragmatism:</td>
<td>Same as “Against Pragmatism” (see above)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Endnote
Russill, of course, is not the first communication theorist to write on pragmatism, only the first to define pragmatism as a distinct tradition of communication theory in Craig’s scheme. Having encountered his interpretation, one revisits the existing literature on pragmatism in communication studies with new eyes. Themes of incommensurability and pluralistic community are present but not strongly emphasized in key collections of essays by Langsdorf (1995), in which epistemological and phenomenological commentaries on pragmatism are prominent, and Perry (2001), in which pragmatism is treated primarily as an approach to inquiry. Pragmatist ideas of communication are mentioned but not deeply examined in either set of essays. CMM theory (Cronen, 2001; Pearce, 1989; Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997) stands out as a key exemplar of pragmatist communication theory in Russill’s sense. Richard McKeon (a student of Dewey) earlier articulated a philosophy of communication that is also squarely in Russill’s tradition and deserves to be reexamined in this light (see Hauser & Cushman, 1973; McKeon, 1957). St. John & Shepherd (2004) exemplify another, more recent line of work in the pragmatist tradition as Russill defines it. Peters (1999) formulates Dewey’s view of communication in a somewhat different way from Russill and argues for an alternative pragmatist communication theory inspired in part by Emerson. Russill’s interpretation of pragmatism now enters this conversation.