

Book Review

The Complexity of Human Communication (2nd ed.). By Philip J. Salem.
Hampton Press: Cresskill NJ., 2013, vii + 255 pp., ISBN 978-1-61289-106-4, 978-1-61289-107-1(pbk.).

This book was written “for those interested in communication who wanted to know more about complexity and for those interested in nonlinear phenomena who were curious about communication (p. vii).” Indeed, Professor Philip Salem has skillfully conflated two topics that are likely of interest to readers of *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Sciences (NDPLS)*. The contents of the book and his presentation of ideas will satisfy the demanding, intellectual appetite of experienced scholars and budding researchers alike.

The book’s nine chapters have a conversational tone and are bundled into three comprehensive themes: review of traditional, general communications theory; drill-downs into specific areas of communications research transmuted by the complexity viewpoint, and; implications of adopting the blended perspective. Each chapter is accompanied by a comprehensive References section. Consistent with Salem’s description of the book’s target audience, the chapters are followed by *two* separate and distinct glossaries: a 41-term Communications Glossary, and a 29-term Complexity Glossary. Moreover, the book offers an Author Index consisting of 729 names from the communications and complexity scholarship community, and a 359-term Subject Index.

A persistent theme throughout, Salem effectively melds the traditional research on communication theory with that of contemporary nonlinear science to expel what is referred to as the *Print Paradigm* of traditional communication literature. *Print Paradigm* refers to how communication is traditionally studied: as a sequential process. Instead, Salem presents his observation and insightful supposition that human communication is actually a much messier process. The Print Paradigm has limitations, and human communications are really a process with inherently nonlinear characteristics and constructs.

Chapter One serves as a primer to the descriptive view of past traditional social scientists and major thinkers of various aspects of communication. The now-traditional ideas and communications-related advances of Dewey, Bergson, Mead, Wittgenstein, Lewin, Bateson, Campbell, Chomsky, and Buckley are presented individually in learned, concise and appetizing 500-1,000 word morsels. Chapter Two takes on explaining concepts and ideas pertaining to complexity theory—such as catastrophes, autopoiesis, chaos, dissipative structures, complexity—, dynamic systems—such as autocatalytic processes, attractors, thresholds and transformational processes—, and limitations of these ideas. Chapter Two also integrates these ideas with the

traditional communication theory ideas presented in Chapter One, by providing paradigmatic principles for understanding the complexity of human communication.

Chapter Three continues the melding of the two principle subjects of the book by revisiting many of the traditional, Print Paradigm theories presented in Chapter One, but now using a lens of complexity to provide an insightful discussion on the science of information with an innovative emphasis on the form, pattern and variety of information. Again, Salem argues throughout the book that the *Print Paradigm* is deficient and in Chapter Three (and throughout) he does a good job convincing the reader accordingly.

Chapter Four points out that the Print Paradigm embodies observable human communication constructs that are from a mechanistic perspective and the unobservable constructs from a psychological perspective; whereas, by applying the complexity paradigm human communication using a Social Channel Model, which inserts episodic, internal experiences of the actors' beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings and intentions and the relationship between the actors into a complexity-oriented, descriptive model of human communications – aspects of human communications that have been ignored in traditional theories.

Chapter Five transitions the book into the three chapters that drill-down into specific aspects of human communications by applying the complexity perspective. The chapter addresses the self as the communicator and expounds on self-perception in the communications process, and that the self is part of a message being presented that can also be greatly affected by equivocal social cues and their responses.

Chapter Six presents the notion of stories in the communication process and how there are a time and re-construction aspects as stories can change “with or without malice (p. 131)” The stories can have attractors and basins, and can follow generative rules that can evolve, agent by agent; stories can be artifacts of emergent social patterns. Chapter Seven discusses how the evolution of communication patterns are related to feelings and trust between people, which can be a recursive phenomenon. The patterns may also be affected by the emerging nature of social networks and actors' positions within their networks. Communication is affected by a basin that serves as a balance between similarity and differences.

Chapter Eight completes the segment on drill-down into specific areas of communications process and theories, by focusing on conflict in human communications, which is described as “the expresses struggle between independent parties over perceived differences (p. 186)” Salem explores patterns of social conflict, which can be either positive or negative, alternatively, constructive or destructive. He points out that the Print Paradigm has a bias towards the stability of conflict and he suggests such research neglects multiple bifurcation points and theories on how fitness is improved.

Chapter Nine concludes the core text of the book by offering that there are three challenges to develop human communication theory that incorporates

complexity. First, the challenge to studying a process that involves time and history is inherently difficult. Second, the challenge of describing emergence in a communication systems; for example, macro effects emerge from micro processes, but it unclear how the effects influence the processes themselves. Thirdly, it is a challenge to incorporate complexity phenomena in a model of human communications either through mathematical or agent-based models. The chapter concludes with a short discussion on ethics in communications and makes a call for researching human communication as a complex process. Over and above the traditional and sequential Print Paradigm.

Reflecting on my experience reading and re-viewing “The Complexity of Human Communication,” I found the book interesting, easy to read, and extraordinarily understandable for what is indeed a messy phenomenon of human behavior. Salem does a great job keeping the readers interest throughout. However, while reading I often found my mind wondering off into thoughts of my own personal experiences in the communication process; a positive distraction in order to personalize the theories, models and concepts Salem is presenting. Indeed, after going through the book, Professor Salem won this reader over to his overarching point that, human communication needs to be viewed as a complex phenomenon and that tradition communication theories—code-named the Print Paradigm—are insufficient, as they fail to recognize and capture the now-obvious inherent complexities of human communication.

In short, this book does fully accomplish the *NDPLS*-alumni’ (see Salem, 2013) goal of alerting scholars to his apprehension about the Print Paradigm and enlisting the reader to the view that undeniably, communications theory and research appropriately should take a complexity approach to advance knowledge in the domain. Indeed, this is an invaluable book “for those interested in communication who wanted to know more about complexity and for those interested in nonlinear phenomena who were curious about communication (p. vii).”

REFERENCES

- Salem, P. (2013). The complexity of organizational change: Describing communication during organizational turbulence. *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Sciences*, 17, 49-65.

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