

## Book Review

# The Art of Communication in a Polarized World

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Conway, K. (2020). *The Art of Communication in a Polarized World*. Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press.

For many people, the world is now more politically divided than ever. The impacts of rising populist and nationalist movements are being felt all around the world. Set against the backdrop of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, many people yearn for practical guidance as to how to address divisions at the same time as creating the conditions for civil conversation. This is the context in which Kyle Conway's *The Art of Communication in a Polarized World* breaks into the world. While Conway does not pretend to have a magic solution for resolving an increasingly divided world, nevertheless, his proposed method for reaching a solution is understandable and practical, drawing upon the interdisciplinary field of communication studies and its related disciplines.

Conway's book provides a technical yet plain speaking account of the basic tenets of communication theory, a style of delivery increasingly common in texts intended to be used for teaching as much as they are pitched at wider scholarly debate. Rather than using terms like 'co-creation', 'epistemic construction', and 'poetic meaning-making', Conway's book approaches the discipline of communication from a practical standpoint, grounding communication processes, perceptions, and outcomes in cultural translation. Most readers will be familiar with trying to negotiate meaning in an increasingly culturally diverse world. Conway uses this common experience as a window onto exploring the relationship between and notion of communication theory as cultural translation.

The connection Conway makes between communication theory and translation draws on ideas and perspectives from a range of intellectual traditions including semiotics, critical/cultural perspectives, linguistics, and rhetoric, to name only the most prominent. While each of these traditions, or sub-fields, is characterized by the distinctiveness of its perspective, Conway points out points of collaboration and crossover between them. He does this in order to develop his three axioms of communication: to use a sign is to transform it; to transform a sign is to translate it; and communication is translation.

Conway's book adopts a logically coherent and orderly structure. The book begins by outlining the problem Conway wishes to address: the problem of understanding the role of communication and theory for his students. He then turns to provides a potential solution in the form of his meta-theory and explains some of the positive and negative implications of adopting his solution. The introduction of the book lays out Conway's claim that translation comprises 'a semiotic economy where signs are exchanged for other signs on a basis of negotiation rather than equivalence' (p. 5). Theory is a way of translating our experiences in the world at the same time as it imbues our experiences with meaning. Conway claims all people do theory implicitly; his book encourages us to become explicitly aware of and observe the ways in which we do theory, in order that we might arrive at deeper understanding of this.

Chapter one outlines the basic elements of Conway's meta-theory. Here, he outlines three axioms: 1) to use a sign is to transform it; 2) to transform a sign is translate it; and 3) communication is translation. As argued by Conway, negotiation presupposes translation because communication is negotiation of meaning. More importantly, Conway argues negotiation creates space in meaning, or a gap as he conceptualizes it, one in which meaning can be invented. Chapter 2 provides a reading using Conway's approach of Orwell's *1984* and the terms associated with its themes of social manipulation.

Chapter 3 comprises an analysis of rhetorical invention and forms the foundation of Conway's central argument. In identifying the available means of persuasion, Aristotle's definition of rhetoric, rhetoricians create mental understandings of the world for audiences; this requires inventing these linguistic realities. Invention is a negotiation between what audiences understand about their lived experiences and what might otherwise be. Translation utilizes lived experiences to frame rhetorical alternatives and substitutions in understandable terms. This, as Conway points out, is an act of invention: constructing and choosing the right frame so that others may agree with, or at least understand, one's own perspective. The final chapters of the book present myriad rich examples of cultural translation and invention.

The conclusion of the book encourages readers to embrace the consequences of translation and invention. One such vital consequence involves recognizing that the reader may be wrong in their interpretation and translation of meanings, or communication perspectives. Through acknowledgement of this possibility, Conway argues, an ethics of humaneness begins to emerge because a better inventional translation of meaning hopefully corrects a poor one. This is not a magical solution to polarization; recognizing our flaws in understanding requires humility, and that can be problematic. Nevertheless, Conway's claim does enable the reader to understand that theory is inherently flawed. Though theory tries to generalize experience, experience also has a way of disrupting our generalizations. Invention and translation help us to negotiate those disruptions in communication theory.

This book is a useful and practical one for those seeking to understand basic elements of communication theory; not least because it demonstrates the translational process it is describing. That said, however, it was written primarily for use in the classroom context. Its primary audience is graduate communication theory students, whom it seeks to guide through the process of translation in communication. The appendix also has resources and examples of how Conway uses his meta-theory in his classroom. As such, the book is an invaluable one both for instructors and students of communication theory. The book would also be useful as guided reading for advanced undergraduate communication students considering graduate school.

But Conway's book may well appeal to a wider scholarly audience. Conway's invitation to invention in communication theory welcomes new and seasoned scholars alike to a conversation about the utility of a meta-theoretical approach to communication theory that takes contingency, created by a gap in meaning, seriously. Scholars from other disciplines will find it orients them to some of the foundational issues in communication. For these reasons, Conway's greatest contribution with this book is his pragmatic approach to theory.

*The Art of Communication in a Polarized World* is a practical guide to thinking through the work communication does in our communities. Communication theory should reflect the ongoing need to reevaluate theory as meaning changes through invention and translation.