© Academy of Management Review
1992, Vol. 17, No. 2, 299–326

GENRES OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: A STRUCTURATIONAL APPROACH TO STUDYING COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA

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Drawing on rhetorical theory and structuration, this article proposes *genres of organizational communication* as a concept useful for studying communication as embedded in social process rather than as the result of isolated rational actions. Genres (e.g., the memo, the proposal, and the meeting) are typified communicative actions characterized by similar substance and form and taken in response to recurrent situations. These genres evolve over time in reciprocal interaction between institutionalized practices and individual human actions. They are distinct from communication media, though media may play a role in genre form, and the introduction of new media may occasion genre evolution. After the genre concept is developed, the article shows how it addresses existing limitations in research on media, demonstrates its usefulness in an extended historical example, and draws implications for future research.

Human communication has always been central to organizational action. Today, the introduction of various sophisticated electronic communication technologies and the demand for faster and better forms of interaction are visibly influencing the nature of much organizational communication. These pressures are giving rise to hitherto poorly understood changes in what, how, when, why, and with what effect organizational communication occurs. Yet, such changes are not unprecedented; the nature and role of communication in organizations is always evolving as individual actors interact with social institutions over time (Weick, 1979, 1987).

This ongoing interaction between individuals and institutions can be seen as an instance of what Giddens (1984) termed *structuration*. Structuration theory involves the production, reproduction, and transformation of social institutions, which are enacted through individuals' use of social rules. These rules shape the action taken by individuals in organizations; at

The authors would like to thank Lotte Bailyn, Cynthia Beath, Jolene Galegher, Tom Malone, and Dan Robey for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Center for Coordination Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Both authors contributed equally to this article.

the same time, by regularly drawing on the rules, individuals reaffirm or modify the social institutions in an ongoing, recursive interaction. Only a few researchers have drawn on Giddens's (1984) structuration theory in their treatment of organizational communication (Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990; Manning, 1989; McPhee, 1985; Monge & Eisenberg, 1987; Poole & DeSanctis, 1989, 1990; Poole & McPhee, 1983). For example, Poole and DeSanctis (1989) used structurational concepts to examine how groups appropriate the interaction rules of their group decision support systems, thereby structuring their group communication and reinforcing or modifying their systems' influence over time.

This article adapts the concept of *genre* from rhetorical theory and uses it to explain organizational communication as a structuration process. Genre is a literary and rhetorical concept that describes widely recognized types of discourse (e.g., the novel, the sermon). In the context of organizational communication, it may be applied to recognized types of communication (e.g., letters, memoranda, or meetings) characterized by structural, linguistic, and substantive conventions. These genres can be viewed as social institutions that both shape and are shaped by individuals' communicative actions. By situating genres within processes of organizational structuration, the proposed framework captures the continuing interaction between human communicative action and the institutionalized communicative practices of groups, organizations, and societies.

GENRES OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Background and Concept

Rhetoricians and literary critics since Aristotle's time have used genre as the basis for classifying types of rhetorical discourse and literary works. In traditional literary scholarship (e.g., Holman, 1972), the term *genre* was typically and loosely defined to mean a classification based on form and topic, such as a tragedy, a comedy, the novel, and the epic. In rhetoric, discourse was classified into genres such as the elegy or the inaugural address by one or more of a variety of characteristics, including form, subject, audience, or situation. (For extensive reviews of this literature, see Campbell & Jamieson, 1978; Miller, 1984.)

Since the late 1970s, the concept of rhetorical genre has received considerable attention. Rhetoricians have attempted to define the concept more precisely than in the past and have taken a more contextual approach to it. Simons (1978: 42), for example, defined *rhetorical genre* as "a distinctive and recurring pattern of similarly constrained rhetorical practices," in which the constraint is based primarily on purpose and situation. Harrell and Linkugel (1978: 263–264) argued that "rhetorical genres stem from *organizing principles* found in *recurring situations* that generate discourse characterized by a family of *common factors*." Of the most use here, Miller (1984: 159) identified genres "as typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations." These attempts at redefinition of rhetorical genre all draw on Bitzer's (1968:

8) concept of a rhetorical situation composed of three critical elements: an exigence (something needing to be done), an audience (who must be affected or influenced), and constraints ("persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence").

Miller (1984) modified Bitzer's relatively objective notion of exigence by introducing an element of subjectivity. Drawing on Burke's (1973) notion that motives (i.e., human action as subjectively perceived) rather than objective circumstances constitute the essence of situations, Miller (1984: 157) argued that exigence is neither totally objective nor totally subjective but rather "a form of social knowledge—a mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need." In response to this *objectified social need*, humans enact typical rhetorical practices or genres characterized by patterns of form and substance. Thus, genres are typified rhetorical action in the context of socially defined recurrent situations. This concept of rhetorical genre has been used within rhetorical research to study various types of discourse, ranging from the experimental scientific article (Bazerman, 1988) to the documentary film (Gronbeck, 1978). In a study of genre in a professional community, Devitt (1991) used documents from six major accounting firms as a basis for identifying a number of genres common to the tax accounting profession (e.g., opinion letters and memoranda to the file).

Drawing on Miller's concept of rhetorical genres, we propose a similar concept: *genres of organizational communication*. This concept can be applied to a wide range of typical communicative practices occurring in organizations, and it provides a new perspective on organizational communication that is both interactive and socially embedded. Thus, it allows us to examine the production, reproduction, and modification of different types of organization communication over time and under different circumstances.

A genre of organizational communication (e.g., a recommendation letter or a proposal) is a typified communicative action invoked in response to a recurrent situation. The *recurrent situation* or socially defined need includes the history and nature of established practices, social relations, and communication media within organizations (e.g., a request for a recommendation letter assumes the existence of employment procedures that include the evaluation and documentation of prior performance; a request for a proposal is premised on a system for conducting and supporting research). The resulting genre is characterized by similar substance and form. *Substance* refers to the social motives, themes, and topics being expressed in the communication (e.g., the positive or negative recommendation and the supporting characteristics of the recommendee; the proposing of the project including its rationale and design). *Form* refers to the observable physical and linguistic features of the communication (e.g., inside address and salutation of a letter; standard sections of a proposal). There are at least three aspects of form in organizational communication: structural features (e.g., text-formatting devices such as lists and fields and devices for struc-

turing group interactions, such as an agenda and a chairperson for a meeting), communication medium (e.g., pen and paper or face to face), and language or symbol system (which would include linguistic characteristics such as formality and the specialized vocabulary of technical or legal jargon).

To illustrate, consider the meeting genre. Individuals invoke this genre in response to a recurrent organizational situation, defined generally by the set of organized group practices emerging from the socially defined demand for face-to-face interaction underlying contemporary organizational culture. In staging and participating in the meeting, participants draw on the characteristic features that constitute meetings: *substance*, defined generally as the participants' joint execution of assigned tasks and responsibilities, and *form*, including prearrangement of time and place, the face-to-face medium within which the meeting is typically executed, and structuring devices such as an agenda and the chairperson's role. A particular instance of this meeting genre would be, for example, a specific meeting of a personnel committee in a law firm. In this case, the recurrent situation is the institutionalized practice of meeting to evaluate employees, with its existing social relations of authority and legitimacy, and its past interactions. The substance of the meeting concerns evaluating the performance of certain employees. The form is a face-to-face meeting with a formal agenda, chaired by the director of personnel, minutes noted by the firm's secretary, and conducted in informal, everyday language.

Drawing on Giddens' (1984) notion of social rules, we posit that genres are enacted through rules, which associate appropriate elements of form and substance with certain recurrent situations. We call these rules *genre rules*. For example, in the case of the business letter, which is invoked in recurrent situations requiring documented communication outside the organization, the genre rules for substance specify that the letter pertain to a business interaction with an external party, and the genre rules for form specify an inside address, salutation, complimentary close, and correct, relatively formal language. The ways in which these genre rules influence the generation of specific communication is central to an understanding of genre as enacted within communities. When individuals draw on the rules of certain genres of organizational communication (genres as the vehicle of communicative action), they also reproduce these genres over time (genres as the outcome of communicative action). For example, when organizational members write business letters or engage in meetings, they implicitly or explicitly draw on the genre rules of the business letter or meeting to generate the substance and form of their documents or interactions. They also, in effect, reinforce and sustain the legitimacy of those rules through their actions.

A particular instance of a genre need not draw on all the rules constituting that genre. For example, a meeting need not include minutes or a formal agenda for it to be recognizable as a meeting. Enough distinctive genre rules, however, must be invoked for the communicative action to be

identified—within the relevant social community—as an instance of a certain genre. A chance encounter of three people at the water cooler, which is not preplanned and lacks formal structuring devices, would not usually be considered a meeting.

Genre rules may operate tacitly, through socialized or habitual use of communicative form and substance, or they may be codified by an individual or body into specific standards designed to regulate the form and substance of communication. Adherence to codified genre rules may be mandated at various social levels, as with laws requiring tax returns to conform to IRS standards, or explicit organizational regulations requiring expense reports that conform to corporate standards. Genre rules also may be standardized by being embedded in a medium, as with preprinted paper forms such as credit or job application blanks, or electronic templates such as the headings provided by electronic mail systems.

Inherent in the notion of genre as presented above is the issue of *level of abstraction*. For example, if the business letter is a genre of organizational communication, what about the recommendation letter? Similarly, if the meeting is a genre, what about the personnel committee meeting? In each case, the variants derived from the more general type differ primarily by being more specific in subject and form. Do they constitute genres? Miller (1984: 162) suggested that genre may be defined at different levels in different cultures and at different times, depending on "our sense of recurrence of rhetorical situations." Applying this notion to organizational genre, the business letter and the meeting might at one point be genres, whereas at another point, these types of communication might be considered too general and the recommendation letter or the personnel committee meeting might better capture the social sense of recurrent situation. Although Miller maintained that genre can only be identified at one of these levels in a specific time and place, Simons (1978: 37) argued that genre need not be identified at a single level: "Rather than haggling over the level at which something becomes a genre as opposed to a family or species, one might better recognize that genres 'exist' at various levels of abstraction, from the very broad to the very specific." Within limits, this flexible approach seems more useful in dealing with the vast range of communication in organizations; that is, the business letter and the recommendation letter, the meeting and the personnel committee meeting may all be designated as genres of organizational communication if there can be identified for each a recurrent situation, a common subject (either very general or more specific), and common formal features. For example, the study of genres in the tax accounting profession (Devitt, 1991) identified six distinct types of letters (e.g., opinion letters and promotional letters) and three types of memoranda (e.g., research memos and administrative memos).

It may be useful to discuss the relationship of genres on different levels of abstraction; if so, we can invoke a notion of *subgenres* within genres. For example, the positive recommendation letter could be viewed as a subgenre of the recommendation letter, which is a subgenre of the business

letter. The term subgenre is, of course, relative, because in the posited nesting, the recommendation letter is a subgenre of the business letter, but it is a genre in relation to its subgenre, the positive recommendation letter. Moreover, this nesting, as well as the concept of genre in general, must be understood to be situated in time and context. In the contemporary American climate of plentiful lawsuits and occasional public disclosure of recommendation letters, a situation may be emerging in which almost all recommendation letters are positive and, thus, the three nested genres can be collapsed into two genres.

Related to, but analytically distinct from, level of abstraction is the issue of *normative scope*. That is, how extensively shared must the social norms of a recurrent communicative situation, along with characteristic subject and formal features, be to qualify as a genre?[1] Must a genre be universally meaningful, or may it be shared across certain types of organizations, within a single organization, or within a single group? What if it is widely applied across organizations in one culture, but not in those of another culture? To pose a contrasting case, what if a single individual has developed a consistent pattern of communicative action in response to a personally identified recurrent situation? Because recurrent situations are socially defined, we can disqualify as a genre the pattern invoked only by a single individual, though such patterns may be of interest as stages in the eventual emergence of a socially defined genre.

Because recurrent situations may be socially defined at any level above the personal, we posit that genres of organizational communication may be shared across the following various kinds of social communities: (a) those that are widely accepted in most advanced industrial nations (e.g., the memo and business letter), (b) those that are specific to organizations within certain societies or particular cultures (e.g., the Japanese tea ceremony or a U.S. environmental impact statement), (c) those specific to transorganizational groups such as occupations and industries (e.g., audit reports, SEC filings), (d) those that reflect distinct organizational or corporate cultures (e.g., the Procter & Gamble one-page memo), and finally (e) those genres that exist within intraorganizational groups such as departments and teams (e.g., the "complex sheet" used by airline ground crews to coordinate the movement of planes into and out of gates, and the transfer of passengers and baggage into and out of planes, Suchman & Trigg, 1991). It appears that genres with a broad normative scope also are more likely to be at a high level of abstraction, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the two aspects of genre can be distinguished. It is, for example, possible to identify genres and subgenres with the same normative scope (e.g., the business letter and the recommendation letter are both used in organizations throughout the United States).

[1] In his examination of artistic genres, DiMaggio (1987: 448) termed this dimension *universality*.

To allow flexibility in use of the genre concept, we have defined it broadly in terms of both normative scope and level of abstraction. Nevertheless, undue proliferation of genres may also weaken the usefulness of the concept.[2] For example, Devitt's (1991) catalog of genres in tax accounting is useful in understanding various aspects of the tax accounting profession. If, however, such cataloging were extended to every industry, it would result in endless lists of genres comparable to the exhaustive (and exhausting) model letter books common in the 19th century (Weiss, 1945). Thus, there is a tension between too broad and too narrow a definition of genre. In a particular use of the concept, the domain or communicative phenomenon being studied should guide the researcher in determining the useful balance between too narrowly and too broadly construing the genre concept. For example, the Procter & Gamble one-page memo may be considered a genre (or a subgenre of the memo) only for certain limited purposes such as studying the socialization of new Procter & Gamble employees.

Production, Reproduction, and Change Over Time

In discussing what constitutes a genre, we have only alluded to the more complex and central dynamic issue of how genres are produced, reproduced, and changed over time. This aspect of genres will now be elaborated upon.

We have suggested that genres emerge within a particular sociohistorical context and are reinforced over time as a situation recurs. As rhetoricians have also observed, these genres, in turn, shape future responses to similar situations. For example, Bitzer's (1969: 13) discussion of recurrent rhetorical situations notes:

> From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established. . . . The situation recurs and, because we experience situations and the rhetorical responses to them, a form of discourse is not only established but comes to have a power of its own—the tradition itself tends to function as a constraint upon any new response in the form.

This view of communicative practices within sociohistorical contexts is particularly compatible with structuration theory (Giddens, 1984).

In structurational terms, genres are social institutions that are produced, reproduced, or modified when human agents draw on genre rules to engage in organizational communication. As social institutions, genres both shape and are shaped by communicative action. To borrow from Barley and Tolbert (1988: 2) on institutions, genres "are by-products of a history of negotiation among social actors that results in shared typifications which gradually acquire the moral and ontological status of taken-for-granted

[2] We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for elaborating on this possibility.

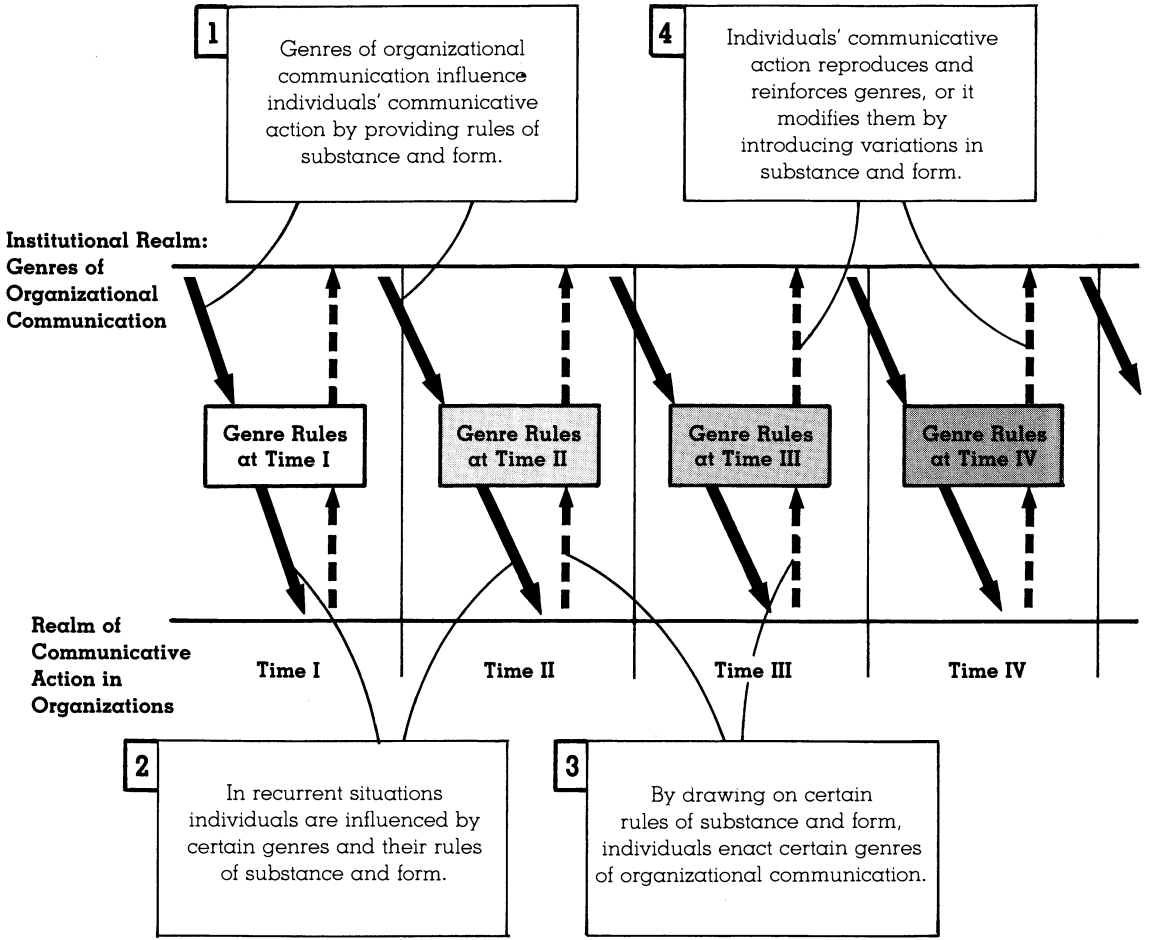
facts." Figure 1 (adapted from Barley, 1986) depicts the processes by which genres are used and reproduced or changed over time in organizational communication.[3] At any given time in a particular firm, genres of organizational communication exist and inform ongoing organizational communication (arrow 1 in Figure 1). Organizational members in certain situations draw on the rules of substance and form of established genres in their communicative action (arrow 2 in Figure 1). By using (or not using) particular genre rules, individuals enact the established genres (or modified versions) (arrow 3 in Figure 1), thus reinforcing and reproducing (or challenging and changing) established genres over time (arrow 4 in Figure 1). The enacted genres then inform future communicative action, and the recursive cycle begins anew.

As this description suggests, although the processes of structuration generally reproduce genres over time, the processes may also change them. That is, even though genres facilitate and constrain communicative choices, genre rules do not create a binding constraint. Instead, human agents continually enact genres, and during such enactment they have the opportunity to challenge and change these genres. Barley and Tolbert (1988: 9) recognized three modes of enacting already-established social institutions—maintenance, elaboration, and modification—which can also be used to understand the production and reproduction of genres. When individuals enact the genres by using the rules of substance and form without alteration, they are *maintaining* the existing genres. When they consistently but slightly adapt genre rules to reflect new conditions—such as a new medium or a new locale—without substantially departing from those genre rules, they are *elaborating* the existing genres (e.g., a firm may customize its own memo stationery with an added field for file number). When individuals depart significantly and persistently from the rules of existing genres, they are *modifying* the existing genres (e.g., when prose reports are replaced by tabular, numeric reports in organizations).

Thus, on occasion, individuals modify (deliberately or inadvertently, whether by mandate or spontaneously) some of the established genre rules of substance and form. These modifications may be triggered by material or perceptual changes in the recurrent situation. That is, changes to the social, economic, or technological context (e.g., changed organizational forms, new or less expensive electronic media, revised reporting requirements), or changes in how social groups recognize and respond to situations (e.g., an ad hoc group's redefinition of itself into a regular task force) may occasion a deviation from habitual use of genre rules. Similarly, changes in elements of form, such as available media, structuring devices, and language, may allow or encourage individuals to violate genre rules. Although rules establish continuity with the past, they are not determining forces because

[3] Although this article depicts institutional forces and social actions sequentially in both the discussion and in Figure 1, this is for analytical clarity only. Processes of structuration occur simultaneously and are often inseparable in practice.

FIGURE 1
Genres of Organizational Communication: Production, Reproduction, and Change Over Time



communicative action can create variations in the rules of substance and form. As Cohen (1989: 45) noted, "There is no guarantee that agents will reproduce regularities of conduct as they previously have done." Thus, the potential for genre modification is inherent in every act of communication. The extent to which established genres actually are modified will depend on the duration, normative scope, and nature of variation from existing genre rules. Significant and persistent modifications to genre rules that are widely adopted result in a modified genre. In some cases, these changes may be so extensive that they lead to the emergence of a new or modified genre (either one that is parallel with an existing genre or one that replaces a genre that has broken down). The result of such ongoing challenges is "that the set of genres is an open class, with new members evolving, old ones decaying" (Miller, 1984: 153).

The structurational account of genre production, reproduction, and change over time helps us to describe and interpret both historical and contemporary changes in communicative practices. It also provides a powerful lens through which to examine the relationships between organizational communication and communication media.

COMMUNICATION MEDIA AND ORGANIZATIONAL GENRES

Overview of Two Streams of Prior Research

Numerous studies focusing on many different variables have examined the relationship between organizational communication and communication media. Although the approaches adopted by these studies seem disparate, from a structurational point of view, we can identify two dominant streams of research that are characterized by their opposing views of the role played by media in organizational communication. One stream of research focuses on the conditions that influence media choice, thus positing communication media as a dependent variable and examining the technical, economic, psychological, and social factors that influence use of media in organizations. The other stream of research focuses on the communication effects of using media, thus positing communication media as an independent or mediating variable that influences certain communicative behaviors or outcomes in organizations.

Research on media choice. The research on media choice has attempted to determine when and with what consequences individuals choose to use a particular communication medium. Such studies have examined the use and appropriateness of various media for different types of communication under various circumstances. Though there are several theories regarding media choice, such as those of *social presence* (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) and *cost minimization* (Reinsch & Beswick, 1990), the most widely studied recent theory, and the one used here to illustrate this stream, is that of *media richness* (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986; Daft, Lengel, & Trevino 1987; Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987). This theory posited that media may be ranked on a continuum according to their capacity to provide immediate feedback, to convey multiple cues, to support personalization,

and to accommodate linguistic variety. The continuum runs from face-to-face interaction at the "rich" end through telephone communication, electronic mail (included only in later studies), and personally addressed written letters and memos to general bulletins and standardized quantitative reports at the "lean" end. The theory states that effective managers choose richer media to convey equivocal or ambiguous messages and leaner media to convey unequivocal messages.

Empirical studies of media choice have shown some support for the media richness concept and its link with managerial effectiveness (Russ, Daft, & Lengel, 1990; Trevino et al., 1987), as well as the effect of situational and individual factors on media choice (Trevino, Daft, & Lengel, 1990). Other studies, however, have found that executives use certain media more often (Rice & Shook, 1990) or for different types of tasks (Markus, 1988) than the theory would predict. Some conceptual limitations have also been noted. Fulk, Schmitz, and Steinfield (1990), for example, pointed out that this theory is limited by assumptions about the rationality and objectivity of decision makers. Decisions about media do not occur in a vacuum; both decision makers and media are socially embedded within organizational settings. Fulk and her colleagues (1990) proposed a more comprehensive "social influence" model which explains that media choice is based not simply on objective characteristics of media and tasks, but it is also based on subjective perceptions that are influenced by social and historical factors. The social influence model overcomes many of the difficulties of the media richness assumptions. Despite the incorporation of many social factors, this literature still focuses primarily on the factors determining media use.

Research on media consequences. In contrast, the other main stream of research has concentrated on the consequences of media use for communication structure, process, and outcomes (see reviews by Culnan & Markus, 1987; Kraemer & Pinsonneault, 1990; Williams, 1977). To illustrate, studies have examined the extent to which electronic media filter out many of the cues—nonverbal (Trevino et al., 1990), social context (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), and social presence (Rice, 1984; Short et al., 1976)—that are associated with face-to-face and other non-computer-mediated forms of communication. For example, one group of researchers (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) found that the language used in electronic communication media was less inhibited than that in face-to-face communication and also included many instances of what they called *flaming* (e.g., emotional outbursts, name-calling, exaggerated emphasis, inappropriate innuendos, sarcasm, and obscene language). More recently, however, the pervasiveness of this phenomenon in social settings has been questioned (Foulger, 1990; Matheson & Zanna, 1989; Rafaeli, 1990). Other researchers have examined the influence of electronic media on communication patterns (Eveland & Bikson, 1988; Feldman, 1987) and language patterns (Ferrara, Brunner, & Whittemore, 1990; Foulger, 1990; Murray, 1985, 1987) within established communities. Despite the focus on social contexts in these studies, this literature still posits media as a relatively fixed influence on social and communicative behaviors.

Limitations of Two Streams of Prior Research

The two streams of research that have been sketched out in the previous section have shed light on numerous aspects of the relationship between media and organizational communication. Several commentators have critiqued this body of work (Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990; Fulk et al., 1990; Krone, Jablin, & Putnam, 1987; Weick, 1983), but the genre perspective on communication in this article highlights two specific areas of concern.

Causal relationships between media and organizational communication. As revealed in the previous section, most existing research focuses *either* on how technical, organizational, personal, or social factors influence media choice and use *or* on how media affect organizational communication, but not on both. A structurational view of communication suggests that each of these accounts, by itself, is incomplete for it fails to examine reciprocal and recursive relationships between media and communication in organizations over time. A small number of researchers have used structurational concepts to study communication media in organizations (Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990; Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). These approaches, like the genre perspective presented here, offer a way of resolving the dualism in the two dominant streams of existing research.

Definitions of media. The notion of communication media is used variously and inconsistently by different researchers in different studies. In particular, the concept of medium has often been confused with that of genre. Confusion arises when researchers compare genres of communication (e.g., memos or bulletins) with communication media (e.g., electronic mail or fax). Genres, however, may be physically created, transmitted, and stored in various media. Thus, comparing memos with electronic mail, for example, confounds the concept of communication medium with that of communication genre.[4] Though a few researchers have applied the term *genre* to communication in electronic media (Foulger, 1990; Reder & Schwab, 1988), this concept has not been theoretically elaborated. Although our notion of genre is clearly differentiated from that of medium, we recognize their interaction by positing that medium may play a role in both the recurrent situation and the form of a genre. For example, a recurrent situation may include a specific medium (e.g., when an electronic mail message typically evokes an electronic mail response). Alternatively, a medium may be conceived as an aspect of a genre's form (e.g., letters are traditionally conceived of as paper-based).

The genre perspective on communication presented in this article, which draws on structurational precepts and distinguishes between the physical means of communication (media) and the typified communicative

[4] Stohl and Redding (1987: 457) identified this problem using the term *format* rather than *genre*. They wrote: "It must be noted also that the dividing line between 'medium' and 'format' is admittedly fuzzy; for example, between telephone, print, and oral media on the one hand; and conversations, interviews, committee meetings, letters and in-house presentation—all formats—on the other."

action (genre), affords a powerful alternative approach to studying communication in organizations. To illustrate its usefulness, an exposition of the development over time of a particular organizational genre, the memo, follows.

GENRE EVOLUTION: HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATION

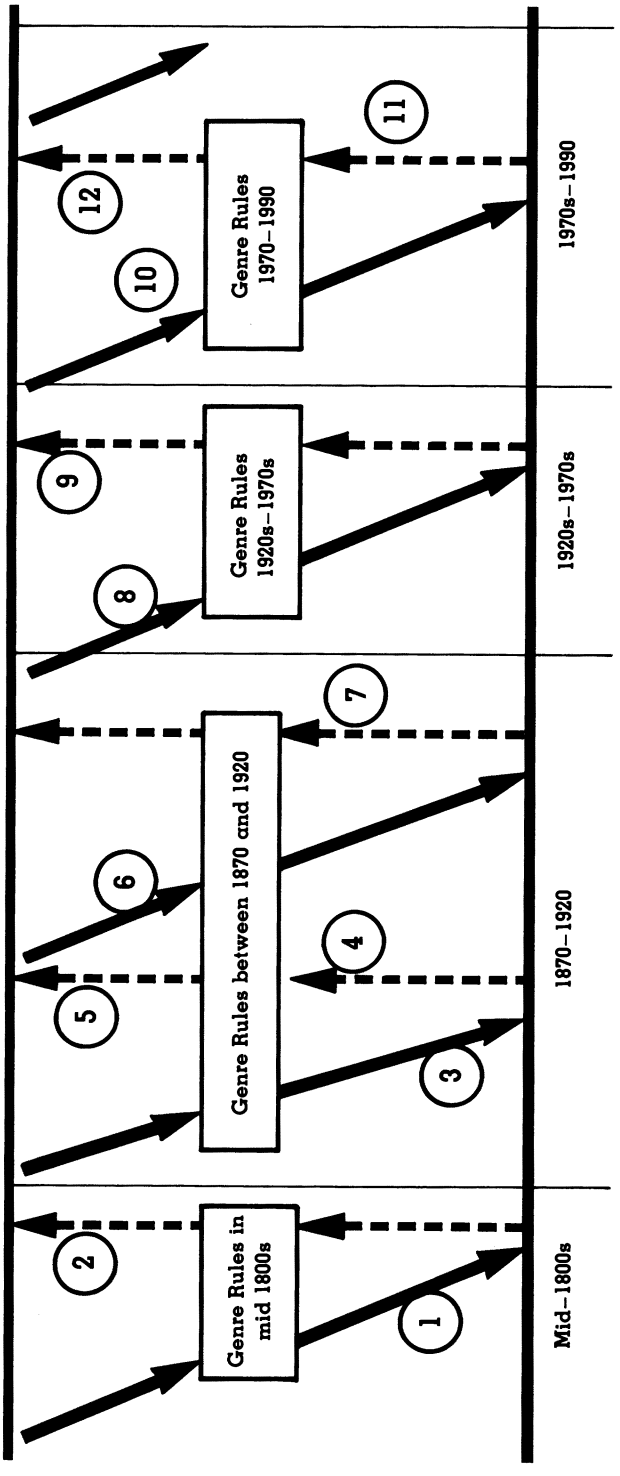
In this section the genre approach is used to examine the gradual evolution of the memo genre of internal business correspondence away from the business letter genre of external correspondence in late 19th- and early 20th-century American firms, and the recent elaboration of this genre in electronic mail. This evolution is depicted in structurational terms in Figure 2.[5] Beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century, an emerging ideology of management created a newly recognized recurrent situation within firms: the managerially defined need to document internal interactions on paper. This ideology, interacting with other situational factors including communication media, triggered the evolution of new rules of substance and form, resulting in the emergence of a particular genre of internal organizational communication—the memo. In recent years, that genre has influenced communication within new media such as electronic mail. The following historical account is based on Yates (1989a, 1989b) (where detailed historical documentation is provided).

Emergence of the Memo Genre

Business correspondence generated by members of a typical mid-19th century American firm was aimed primarily at external individuals or firms. Such communications followed the genre rules of the business letter, exemplified in many model letter books. Members of the firm having been instructed and socialized in the appropriate form of business correspondence, invoked this genre to conduct and document business with another party (arrow 1 in Figure 2). The substance of this genre was managing the business at hand, often a specific transaction (frequently indicated by an opening reference to a previous letter). The form was characterized by distinctive polite language (e.g., "In response to your esteemed favor of the 2nd inst. . . ." and "Your humble servant . . .") and by several standard structural features, including the placement of date, inside address, complimentary close, and signature. The communication medium associated with business letters was pen and paper. Regular use of the business letter genre in recurrent social situations served to reinforce its status as a social institution within firms (arrow 2 in Figure 2). The institutional force of the business letter genre served to shape many communicative transactions among firms of the mid-1800s.

[5] As indicated previously, our sequential discussion and depiction in Figure 2 of institutional forces and social action is analytical only. Additionally, the timing of the major stages is only approximate.

FIGURE 2
Emergence and Institutionalization of Memo Genre in Organizational Communication



A limited amount of correspondence among members of the same firm existed at this time, primarily to bridge physical distances when one party was not available for face-to-face discussion, as when one partner was away from the firm's headquarters on a buying or selling trip. When all involved parties were at the same physical location, ad hoc oral methods, supplemented by traditional financial accounts, were used to coordinate and control operations. In writing intrafirm correspondence to bridge distance, firm members invoked the same business letter genre. Internal letters followed the same conventions of form as letters to external parties, though the language often reflected greater shared knowledge and assumptions. The substance in such letters was still primarily managing the business at hand, but such letters tended to be less focused on a specific transaction and more likely to discuss a whole range of topics relevant to the firm.

Between 1870 and 1920, internal correspondence in manufacturing firms mushroomed in volume and changed in social motive, reflecting the broader socioeconomic changes occurring at the time. This period was one of tremendous firm growth. While at midcentury, small, owner-managed firms with only a single level of management (foremen) characterized the manufacturing sector, by the turn of the century many firms had grown, departmentalized, and acquired several layers of management. When these firms were managed by the oral, ad hoc methods of the earlier period, the result was chaos, loss of control by owners and managers, and diseconomies of scale. To improve efficiency and regain control from the workers and foremen, managers developed new approaches and techniques that coalesced into a new managerial philosophy, later labeled *systematic management* (Litterer, 1961). This ideology, which emerged in engineering and management journals of the period, stressed the importance of documenting operational processes and outcomes and of establishing flows of written communication for internal coordination and control. Written documents were preferred to oral exchanges in many cases because documents could be stored for later consultation and analysis. They created a form of organizational memory.

The emphasis on documentation and use of internal information created a new recurrent situation—the managerially defined demand for documentation of internal interactions (vertical or horizontal, within a single site or between company sites) for later reference. Even though the telephone, widely adopted by businesses shortly after its introduction in 1876, facilitated oral communication within and between the growing factories and plants of this period, it did not satisfy management's demand for documentation. To respond to this exigence, managers increasingly turned to internal correspondence, initially invoking the rules of the business letter genre (arrow 3 in Figure 2).

The growth and expanded functions of internal correspondence put new demands on media for the creation and storage of written communication, and new media evolved and diffused in response to the demands. The typewriter, introduced in the 1870s, was widely adopted by large firms

in the mid-1880s to speed the production of all correspondence.[6] The typewriter influenced emerging genre rules over subsequent decades by making certain structural features (e.g., underlining, all capital letters) easy to distinguish, thus opening the way for increased use of such features as subheads. Tab stops were added to typewriters around the turn of the century, making lists easier to type. Such formatting features were rarely adopted for external letters where the business letter genre continued to hold force. Internally, however, they were more freely adopted to ease the creation and processing of correspondence, hence introducing modifications in the genre rules for internal business letters (arrow 4 in Figure 2). Moreover, typists, a new occupational group which quickly emerged to "operate" this new technology, served as agents of standardization of document format within and across firms. Variation from the business letter genre in internal correspondence thus became common across many organizations, and it was reinforced through ongoing use (arrow 5 in Figure 2).

The new systematic methods of management demanded not simply the creation of many internal documents, but also their ready retrieval for subsequent reference. Storage during this period included both bound volumes for copies of outgoing correspondence and individual, book-like letter boxes for storage of incoming documents. Managers' desire for more accessible storage media encouraged the development and adoption of vertical filing systems (introduced in 1893 and widely adopted in the early years of the 20th century) to replace both types of storage and to combine all documents in a single, functional system. This storage medium was intended to make documents more accessible for reference, organizing correspondence by subject rather than chronology.

Vertical files occasioned changes in rules for the substance and form of internal correspondence. The fact that a document could only be filed under a single subject led some firms to institute procedures limiting internal correspondence to a single subject and requiring subject lines to aid file clerks (arrow 6 in Figure 2). For example, when Scovill Manufacturing Company adopted vertical files, headquarters explained the new filing system in correspondence with the firm's New York store and issued very specific requirements that each letter cover only one subject, to be designated at the top of the sheet. Such a change to standard practice, however, did not come unopposed. One week after this mandate was issued, headquarters wrote to reprimand some lapses in providing the requested subject lines, ending with this statement: "We are changing our system of filing, and we must INSIST that you pay particular attention to this matter." Through such monitoring and exhortations, headquarters finally achieved general use of these standardized communication rules restricting the substance and introducing a new structural feature into its internal correspondence.

[6] Detailed analysis of the records of specific firms undercuts a technologically deterministic argument, showing that in at least these cases, the typewriter did not *cause* the growth in correspondence, but was adopted after the growth was well under way, as a way of dealing with it (Yates, 1989a).

With widespread adoption of vertical files, such rules were widely imposed by other organizations and enacted through individuals' use of these rules (arrow 7 in Figure 2). Eventually, new forms of headings (with the familiar To, From, Subject, and Date fields of today's memo headings) evolved to simplify the addressing conventions for internal documents and to put all the pieces of information relevant to identifying, storing, and retrieving the document in clear view of the file clerk and the recipient of the document. Initially, the exact form of the new headings varied from person to person. Then, either by mandate from management or by hardening custom among typists, the order and placement of heading elements were standardized (though different firms might employ slightly variant elaborations) (arrow 8 in Figure 2). The new headings also eliminated some of the language characteristic of the business letter genre: the polite language of salutations and complimentary closes. Some firms also urged the elimination of other standard polite phrases in favor of directness and brevity, though this change was harder to enforce and occurred only gradually.

Thus, over time, changes in communication substance and form were introduced to better accommodate the demands of internal correspondence (Table 1 traces the evolution of memo genre rules). Through mandate and habitual use, these changes were gradually accepted, legitimized, and reinforced within organizations (arrow 9 in Figure 2), and this pattern of communicative action became recognizable as a new genre of organizational communication. The adoption of the term *memorandum* or *memo* rather than *business letter* to designate internal correspondence was one of

TABLE 1
Emergence and Institutionalization of Memo Genre Over Time

Time Period	Examples of Genre Rules
mid-1800s	**Maintenance of Business Letter Genre** *Substance:* Transacting business with external parties. *Form:* Content and placement of date, inside address, salutation, complimentary close; formal, polite language with extensive use of standard phrases.
1870–1920	**Emergence of Memo Genre for Internal Correspondence** *Substance:* Documentation of internal interactions and outcomes; restricted to single subject. *Form:* Addition of subject lines; compression of inside address and salutation; optional use of subheads or lists; less formal and polite language.
1920–present	**Maintenance of Memo Genre** *Substance:* Standard exchange and documentation of internal interactions and outcomes; restricted to a single subject. Form: Standardized memo heading; direct language.
1970s–1990s	**Elaboration of Memo Genre in Electronic Mail** *Substance:* Internal and external exchanges and some documentation; not restricted to single subject. *Form:* Memo heading template embedded in medium; less use of other structural devices; increasingly informal language.

the last features to be widely accepted, officially signalling the recognition of a new genre of organizational communication.[7] Although these changes did not eliminate the business letter genre, they did lead to the abandonment of the business letter genre for intraorganizational communication. Over subsequent decades, however, some elements of the business letter genre have decayed and others have been elaborated. Even through the business letter has retained its traditional structural elements and their placement, its language has been simplified and made more direct. In addition, structural devices that emerged in the memo (e.g., subject lines, subheadings, and lists) have been adopted as elaborations to the business letter.

The Memo Genre in Electronic Mail

We now turn to a discussion of both how the established memo genre has influenced communication in electronic mail and how the widespread adoption and use of electronic mail in organizations has set the stage for the emergence of new computer-mediated genres of organizational communication. The memo genre, as reinforced and elaborated since the 1920s, was created, transmitted, and stored on paper. With the advent of computers and the demand for faster communication and access to information, a new electronic medium of organizational communication—electronic mail—was created. Systems designers embedded the structural features of the memo heading into the new medium. In this case, computers rather than people routed the messages, so the fields of the memo heading were designed to be readable by computers (as well as humans). A typical memo layout for the fields was not required by computers, so its widespread adoption shows that designers (whether implicitly or explicitly) retained elements of an existing and familiar genre in moving to a new medium (arrow 10 in Figure 2).

Electronic mail messages often demonstrate other aspects of memo substance and form as described previously, indicating that users are drawing on that familiar genre for some of their communication in this newer medium (as was the case with the early internal correspondence and the business letter genre). For example, some electronic mail messages are used to document internal events or outcomes for future reference, often with subject matter restricted to a single topic. Moreover, the language of such messages often exhibits the direct but noncolloquial usage typical of memos. Further, these electronic mail messages may contain subheadings and lists, in spite of the typically more limited formatting capabilities of most systems. In such cases, then, electronic mail messages may clearly be classified as memos, elaborated within the electronic mail medium (see Table 1).

[7] During most of the period under discussion, *memorandum* generally referred to a written note or reminder to oneself. The origin of the term reinforces the central social motive of the emergent genre by emphasizing written documentation for future reference. Although the term was occasionally used in its current sense as early as the late 19th century, its use in that way is not consistent until around 1920.

Yet electronic mail differs from paper in its capabilities, creating new options and new constraints affecting the invocation of the memo genre. This medium allows very rapid asynchronous exchanges, both because it is transmitted so rapidly and because intermediaries such as secretaries are usually bypassed. In contrast, editing facilities in electronic mail are often much less sophisticated than those in word processing. The system header format follows that of the memo, except that it uses system identifiers in place of names in the To and From fields. Although these are sometimes clearly recognizable variants on the individuals' names, sometimes they are nonmeaningful sequences of letters and numbers. Also, various local electronic mail systems have been linked by large, multinode networks such as Bitnet and CompuServe, making them useful for interorganizational communication (which would typically call for a letter, informal note, or telephone call rather than a memo).

These differences may help explain some of the variations from memo genre rules that can be observed in many electronic mail messages. For example, messages sometimes contain author-added headers and sign-offs, which occasionally resemble those of a letter (e.g., "Dear Chris" and "Regards, Jane") or more often those of an informal note (e.g., "Hi, Chris—" and "Jane"). The language in many electronic mail messages is more informal and colloquial than is generally used in memos, and spelling and grammatical errors considered inappropriate in memos tend to be tolerated in this medium. These deviations may, in part, reflect the typical rapidity of and lack of secretarial mediation in this medium, as well as its weaker editing facilities and the lack of typing skills among many electronic mail users. In terms of substance, electronic mail is often used to convey messages that would not typically be handled through memos and that require no documentation (e.g., a two-line invitation to meet for lunch or a one-word response to a question). The possibility of rapid but nonintrusive exchanges may encourage individuals to use the medium for messages that are ephemeral and too incomplete to stand alone, unlike the memo and the business letter, which are intended for future reference and, hence, are more comprehensive.

Thus, organizational members draw selectively on the memo genre rules in this new medium (arrow 11 in Figure 2), sometimes maintaining it and sometimes elaborating it (arrow 12 in Figure 2). However, some electronic mail messages resemble genres other than the memo, such as the voicemail message or the informal note, or display unique characteristics. For example, Markus's (1988) study of electronic mail usage found a convention of what she calls *mosaic messages*, which result from the appending of responses to received messages to create continuity and conversational context. Variation in form and substance in response to similar situations reveals, as would be expected within a new medium, some ambiguity among individuals about what genres are appropriately invoked in which situations. Whether unique variations such as the mosaic messages represent the first stage in the emergence of one or more new genres of organizational communication remains to be seen. The emergence of

such new genres, however, need not signal the demise of the memo genre, just as the memo genre emerged in parallel with, not in place of, the business letter genre. The memo genre may coexist with any potential new genres that emerge in the new medium, allowing individuals to enact any one genre (or combination of genres) in specific situations.

EXPLANATORY POWER OF GENRE APPROACH

The explanation of the emergence and institutionalization of the memo genre provided in the previous section shows how the genre approach furnishes a number of advantages vis-à-vis more traditional approaches to organizational communication and media. In particular, it allows us to transcend the two limitations in research on media identified earlier. First, the genre approach allows the integration of the two separate causal perspectives in media research, and second, it addresses the conceptual issues surrounding the nature and role of media in organizational communication.

Integration of Causal Perspectives in Media Research

The concept of genre developed here integrates two approaches to studying media that typically have been treated separately in the literature. It suggests that the conditions influencing media use and the consequences of media use are tightly coupled in a process of structuration over time. Thus, the practice of focusing on one set of relationships at the expense of the other, although useful for certain analytic purposes, may, if overused or used in isolation, encourage a misleading reliance on one-sided explanations—either technological determinism or rational choice (Markus & Robey, 1988; Orlikowski, In press). For example, many individuals do not put opening salutations and closing sign-offs in electronic mail messages. From the perspective of technological determinism, this practice, which could be seen as impersonal in comparison to a letter or a note, may be attributed to the depersonalizing influence of electronic media. From the perspective of rational choice, this practice may be attributed to the rational decision of individuals to avoid redundancy with the system header and, thus, to work efficiently.

The genre perspective, on the other hand, does not attempt to understand the practice as an isolated act or outcome, but as communicative action that is situated in a stream of social practices which shape and are shaped by it. Any time a new communication medium is introduced into an organization, we expect that existing genres of communication will influence the use of this new medium, though the nature of this influence will reflect the interaction between existing genres and human action within specific contexts. In this case, the absence of salutations and sign-offs may be attributed to users drawing on memo genre rules that inhibit the use of openings and closings, an influence encouraged by the memo-like heading of their electronic mail systems. The reciprocal nature of the genre approach also allows us to see the unintended institutional consequences of the users' actions—that such use of genre rules reinforces the legitimacy of the memo

genre and extends its reach into electronic media. Conversely, when individuals add greetings and sign-offs, the genre perspective allows us to interpret their actions as invoking other genres, such as the informal note or the letter, or as modifying existing genre rules in ways that may ultimately lead to the emergence of new genres in response to new recurrent situations. Finally, by focusing on process and recursive interaction over time, this approach points researchers toward longer range explanations that put contemporary media such as electronic mail in historical perspective.

Clarification of the Nature and Role of Media

The approach presented here avoids the confusion between medium and genre by allowing us to distinguish between them and to understand how they shape each other. Media are the physical means by which communication is created, transmitted, or stored. Genres are typified communicative actions invoked in recurrent situations and characterized by similar substance and form. Though a genre's form may at one point include the medium, that genre may also expand into other media, as with the memo genre when it is invoked within electronic mail, or as with accounting records that have migrated from clay tablets, to ledger books, to punched cards, and most recently to electronic files.[8]

Further, clarifying the nature of medium and genre may inform previous studies of media. In particular, this distinction raises questions about the media richness continuum, which combines media and genres on a single scale. For example, the memo and bulletin are different genres traditionally associated with the same medium and, thus, should occupy the same point on the continuum. The fact that they occupy separate points suggests that genre mediates the influence of communication media. Recognition of genre's mediating influence on communication may also illuminate phenomena such as flaming, currently attributed primarily to new media. Because the language of flaming is not at all characteristic of the memo and business letter genres, it should not be common in situations in which individuals are enacting these more traditional genres in electronic mail, with their characteristic structural indicators and substance. In cases where flaming occurs, there may be other violations of the rules of these genres, as well as the possible emergence of new genres of which flaming is more characteristic. Thus, the distinction between medium and genre makes possible a richer understanding of communication in new media.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The concept of genres of organizational communication developed and illustrated here, illuminates the complex ways in which types of organizational communication emerge in interaction with certain sociohistorical con-

[8] Note that even though the movement of a genre into a new medium *may* result in its movement out of the old medium, it is also possible for the genre to continue to be invoked in both media.

ditions, become institutionalized through reinforcing cycles of use, and evolve over time and in relation to changes in situation. This theoretical approach suggests both areas for future research and methodological approaches to such research.

Future Research Topics Using Genres of Organizational Communication

Empirical research is needed to investigate the various social, economic, and technological factors that occasion the production, reproduction, or modification of different genres in different sociohistorical contexts. For example, the case of the memo suggests that under different historical conditions, different factors may influence genre development more strongly. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a changing ideology of management significantly shaped the social recognition of a new recurrent situation that led to the emergence of a particular type of communicative action (writing internal correspondence to document organizational interactions and outcomes). At the same time, new communication media (such as the typewriter and vertical files) played a role in shaping the form of the newly emerging memo genre. The recent adoption of new communication media may be triggering the modification of existing genres such as the memo, as well as the emergence of new genres. Electronic mail, for example, may make it convenient to communicate in situations where no communication or a different type of communication would have occurred in the past. To the extent that such situations come to be recognized as recurrent, new genres of organizational communication may emerge, and their form may, in part, reflect the capability of the media. Although some developments in the structural and linguistic features characterizing electronic mail have been noted, without further empirical study it is not clear whether these have become sufficiently widespread or stable within smaller or larger communities to be institutionalized as genres. Further research should also illuminate which factors or conditions influence the possible emergence of such genres in electronic communication media.

Another important factor influencing the development and institutionalization of genres is the national, industrial, organizational, or occupational context. For example, genres with a wide normative scope, such as the memo, cross such boundaries fairly easily, though they may be elaborated to reflect particular local environments. In contrast, genres with a more limited normative scope, sometimes subgenres of the more broadly recognized genres, emerge within particular contexts—for example, opinion letters to clients in the accounting profession (Devitt, 1991) or customer support calls in service organizations (Pentland, 1991). When genre rules are not mandated, they are likely to emerge and be institutionalized in specific contexts and communities first; they will achieve broader acceptance later only if the emerging genre is perceived by a larger community to respond to a common recurrent situation. Comparative research would illuminate the range of influences across different industries, organizations, occupations, and nations. In addition, detailed examinations of

genre emergence within organizations may uncover a process by which groups and organizations adopt as genre rules practices originating with individuals.

The concept of genre has much broader implications than those discussed thus far. Because communication is central to organizations, genres of organizational communication can be expected to influence a wide range of organizational phenomena. For example, some areas for study include the influence of genres on information exchange and influence in social networks, the role of genres as carriers of ideologies or cultures at the organizational level, and the use of genres as instruments of impression management at the individual level. Although it is not possible to explore these issues in this article, we briefly describe one such research area—the role of genre in organizational power and prestige.

Within the framework posed in this article, genre rules would function both as instruments and outcomes of organizational power and politics. Scott (1987: 508) observed that institutional rules "are important types of resources, and that those who can shape or influence them possess a valuable form of power." For example, near the end of the 19th century, the president of the Illinois Central Railroad was having trouble getting his middle managers to provide financial analyses of proposed track improvements. Consequently, he tried to impose a new genre rule for such proposals—that they include an assessment of the project's expected return on investment (Yates, 1989a). To the extent that imposed rules become institutionalized through others' continued enactment of them, new genre rules are outcomes of power play. Where they are not adhered to (the president of the Illinois Central Railroad quickly learned that his subordinates simply failed to understand the concept of return on investment and thus provided irrelevant assessments), the exercise of power fails. In fact, such an exercise of power may backfire if superiors accept compliance at face value, not realizing that the information provided is vacuous or distorted.

Power also may be exercised through the manipulation or selective application of existing genre rules. As Eisenberg and Phillips (1991) pointed out, individuals manipulate communication through the strategic use of devices such as ambiguity, politeness, and agenda control. For example, the chair of a meeting may deal with the unexpected raising of a sensitive issue by invoking the formal agenda to suppress the issue, while at other times this same chair may allow discussion of a nonsensitive topic that was not on the formal agenda. In these cases, individuals apply genre rules to their advantage—thereby using the rules as instruments of their power. Both direct imposition and selective application of genre rules may occur at multiple levels, affecting individuals, groups, organizations, occupational communities, and even nations.[9] Genres thus represent another vehicle for

[9] During the recent Senate confirmation hearings on Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, much political commentary centered on the manipulation and negotiation of the genre rules of such confirmation hearings.

the potential implementation of power and influence in and across organizations, with consequences not only for the shaping of organizational communication but also for decision making, information processing, and strategic action.

Methods of Studying Genres of Organizational Communication

The genre phenomenon clearly needs elaboration through further empirical study within particular contexts. Although this phenomenon must be understood both synchronically and diachronically, specific studies may take one or both of these approaches. Synchronic analyses would identify the existing genres influencing communication and media use within certain contexts, either by searching for the presence of well-established genres such as the memo or the meeting, or by identifying genres based on detailed analysis of communication form, substance, and the invoking situation. Such analyses also might examine the relationship between genres and other factors such as national culture, communication climates, or work practices. Although synchronic studies focus on a fixed period of time, such studies, nevertheless, must be sensitive to differences in genre dimensions due to diachronic factors such as emergence, maintenance, modification, and decay.

Diachronic studies would investigate the production, reproduction, and change of genres through communicative action over time. Monge, Farace, Eisenberg, White, and Miller (1984) pointed out the importance of capturing process in the study of communication. Longitudinal studies of genre would explore the process underlying the ongoing evolution of genres of organizational communication. For example, studies could examine communication within an organization or industry before and after the introduction of a new medium, or they could trace the use of a new medium within a particular community over the first several months or years to see how existing genres are maintained or modified and new ones emerge. Such studies could also investigate the interaction between genre production, reproduction, or modification and other variables such as power and corporate culture. In addition to longitudinal studies with time spans restricted to researchers' project durations, the memo example demonstrates the importance of studying developments over much longer time periods. Historical studies (e.g., Bazerman, 1988; Yates, 1989a) can contribute to the understanding of the role of genre in organizational communication through in-depth retrospective analyses. Whether the time period covered is short or long, diachronic analysis is essential to observing the processes of genre emergence, maintenance, elaboration, modification, and decay.

Field studies seem appropriate in both synchronic and diachronic investigations because they allow researchers to investigate the genre phenomenon contextually and without constraining the direction of effects examined. Though laboratory experiments have many advantages (e.g., replicability, greater researcher control, and ability to manipulate variables and minimize confounding effects), they isolate the phenomenon of interest

from an organizational context. Thus, such studies would be unable to account for the socially and historically embedded nature of genre, and it would be difficult for researchers to investigate the reciprocal and recursive relationship between organizational communication and genre posited in the theory presented here. In addition, because genres occur within communities ranging from the work group to the organization or professional community, and finally to the national culture, genre studies must be situated within specific contexts and must take into account the normative scope of the genres present in that context.

In conclusion, our genre approach to organizational communication takes into account the inherently situated and dynamic nature of organizational processes. Adapting a concept from rhetoric and using the premises of structuration, we have interpreted organizational communication, not as the result of isolated, rational actions, but as part of an embedded social process that over time produces, reproduces, and modifies particular genres of communication. We expect that this concept of genre will provide new and productive ways of understanding communicative action in organizations.

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