

From ethnography to evolution

Da etnografia à evolução

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ABSTRACT

The author reflects on the development of his epistemic approach to the study of communication and culture first by recounting key experiences he had as a boy and young man, especially travel. He traces the trajectory of his empirical study of media, culture, and communication by citing key scholars and literature as well as his experiences as a professional communicator. Professor Lull's doctoral dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, an innovative ethnography of family life with television, set him on the path of qualitative empirical research for much of his early career. He mentions his article "The Social Uses of Television" and his ethnography of the arrival of television in urban China as his major research accomplishments. In the late 1980s, his focus turned to Latin America, where he has given numerous presentations, seminars, and workshops. His collaboration with the Brazilian-American communications professor Eduardo Neiva helped bring about a transition to his most recent work, the introduction of evolutionary communication as a theoretical alternative in the field.

Keywords: Ethnography, structuration, evolution, evolutionary communication

RESUMO

O autor reflete sobre o desenvolvimento de sua abordagem epistêmica no estudo da comunicação e cultura, primeiramente, por meio de narrativas de experiências-chave que ele teve quando criança e jovem adulto, especialmente viagens. Ele traça a trajetória do seu estudo empírico sobre mídia, cultura e comunicação, citando os principais estudiosos e literatura, bem como suas experiências como comunicador profissional. A tese de doutorado do professor Lull, feita na Universidade de Wisconsin-Madison, uma etnografia inovadora da vida familiar com a televisão, estabeleceu-o no caminho da pesquisa empírica qualitativa por grande parte do seu início de carreira. Ele cita o artigo *The social uses of television* e sua etnografia sobre a chegada da televisão na China urbana como suas maiores conquistas em pesquisa. No final da década de 1980, seu foco se voltou para a América Latina, onde ele participou de várias palestras, seminários e workshops. Seu trabalho colaborativo com Eduardo Neiva, professor de comunicação brasileiro-estadunidense, contribuiu para a transição do autor para seu mais recente trabalho: a introdução da comunicação evolutiva como uma alternativa teórica para a área.

Palavras-chave: Etnografia, estruturação, evolução, comunicação evolutiva

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MATRIZES

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MY INTELLECTUAL *HABITUS* and the decisions, choices, values, and subjectivities that shaped my career as a researcher, writer, and professor reflect a personal trajectory that long precedes five years of formal training in graduate school. I am sure that this is true for most of us.

Communication and culture fascinated me many years before my foray into higher education. Although I consider myself to be a social introvert, I have always loved to express myself through available media, beginning with my voice and body—a private/public divide in expressive behavior that is common among introverts. During high school I became a weekend announcer for a small commercial AM radio station in my hometown of Owatonna, Minnesota, USA. I was the stadium announcer in my high school for football games, a member of the school choir, a writer for the school newspaper, and an actor in school plays.

At age 16, my father gave me something that produced lifelong benefits—a passion for foreign travel and a deep appreciation for the complexity of culture. Dad was a map specialist for an American infantry division fighting in France during World War II. He was determined, 15 years later, to return to Europe to trace his footsteps, refresh his friendship with the French families with whom he stayed during the last stages of the war, and explore countries like Holland, Italy, Austria, and Switzerland—which he had never seen. I became his travel partner for a month-long unchaperoned trip across central Europe by rented car. Dad kept a detailed diary of the trip, filled with observations like the following, describing his impressions of Geneva, Switzerland, on July 4, 1960:

Took an interesting bus tour of the city. Guide spoke English, French, German, and Italian. We made friends here with young English professor and his sister from India.

Unlike most American teenagers even today, especially those who live in the Midwest, I was getting a first-hand experience of multiculturalism. Because of its ethnic diversity and sheer physical beauty, Dad was enamored with Switzerland. As we ate dinner one evening at a hotel restaurant high in the Swiss Alps, Dad said to me: “Look around you, son. We Americans are having French food served by an Italian waiter in Switzerland. The people at the next table are speaking German and that’s a Chinese couple over there.” I’ve never forgotten that multicultural setting more than 60 years ago and Dad’s sensitive and respectful description of it. Not only did he observe and point out the cultural things that interested him, *he wrote them down*. I certainly did not know it at the time, but my ethnographic imagination was starting to take shape.

Figure 1



Figure 2



After graduating from high school in 1963 with average grades and no immediate interest in going to college, I joined the US Army to become an “information and broadcast specialist.” Following training at the Defense Information School then located in New Rochelle, New York, I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, to serve as a military journalist and broadcaster. I also worked off-post on the weekends as a Top 40 deejay for commercial radio stations in Columbus, Georgia.

When I joined the Army, few people (including me) knew about the growing military presence of the United States in Vietnam. But in August, 1965, I was dispatched there with the 1st Air Cavalry division as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s buildup of forces in the war zone. For the first six months in Southeast Asia, I served as a military reporter for *Stars and Stripes*, *Army Times*, and many metropolitan newspapers stateside. In January, 1966, I transferred from my post as a journalist in the central highlands to Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) to become a staff announcer on Armed Forces Radio-Vietnam. I was on-the-air during the *Good Morning, Vietnam!* era of the war. My overnight program on Armed Forces Radio led into the famous “Dawn Buster” show, hosted by Adrian Cronauer, who was played by Robin Williams in that famous film.

Conscription of young men into military service in the United States was mandatory from 1948-1973. That requirement gave me an opportunity to work with several young professional communicators who had been involuntarily drafted into service. They were journalists, photographers, and broadcasters in their civilian lives. All were college graduates, and many of them became

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de facto mentors for me. The experience of covering the war on the ground imbued me with great respect for quality journalism. To this day, I would much rather read a detailed, nuanced, well-sourced journalistic account of a legitimate news story or policy issue than pore through most articles that appear in academic journals.

By the time I turned 21 I had toured central Europe with my father and been deployed to Southeast Asia by the Army—two monumental events in my life. I did not really want to go on that long summer trip with Dad at age 16; chasing girls and playing baseball were far more important. And the military deployment was fraught with danger. But those experiences positively shaped the global worldview I would adopt and the person, researcher, writer, and teacher I would become.

I moved to California to attend college when my military tour of Vietnam ended. To finance my undergraduate education at San Jose State University, I worked as an announcer on a commercial FM progressive rock radio station. In addition to my on-air duties at the station, I was asked by its general manager to conduct telephone survey research on the listening habits of radio audiences in California's Bay Area. That experience—asking people what they listened to on the radio and why at a time when telephone surveys were welcomed by most respondents—became a key moment in my professional development. I realized that I thoroughly enjoyed doing audience research—especially asking respondents open-ended questions about their listening habits.

To further develop my interest in audience research, I moved up the Pacific Coast to pursue a Masters' degree in communication at the University of Oregon. My thesis research took the form of a laboratory experiment that measured television audience members' responses to a videotaped stimulus—a segment of a popular TV show. Embedded in the video was a television "counter advertisement. Counter advertisements were a type of public service announcement that encourages people *not* to buy certain products—those with damaging social or environmental effects, for example. Audience responses to the video, including the counter ad, were measured by each viewer using a hand-held device to continuously indicate how much they "like" or "don't like" what they see on the screen. Created by a professor at the university, the devices were a prototype of equipment which would later be used by commercial research companies to assess the favorability of paid advertisements and reactions to pilots for proposed TV shows. The findings and conclusions of that counter advertisement research led to my first academic publication (Lull, 1974).

My coursework at Oregon also introduced me to the social-scientific study of interpersonal and group communication. I began to think about how the

experience of watching television in the 1970s typically took place in a natural interpersonal context—the family home. Yet, despite their extensive overlap in actual behavior, the academic literature on interpersonal communication and mass communication occupied separate domains. Importantly, around the same time, the idea of communication as a process was emerging as an important new perspective that implicitly encouraged the theoretical intermingling of interpersonal and mass communication (Schramm & Roberts, 1971).

I was determined to study how the processes of interpersonal and mass communication interact in the constituent processes of everyday life. That was the potential line of research I hoped to create when I entered the doctoral program in Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as a graduate teaching fellow in 1973. Fortunately, the departments of Communication Arts and Mass Communication occupied the same building on the Madison campus, allowing convenient access to scholars, courses, and facilities in both areas.

Pursing a doctoral degree can be a very challenging, drawn-out experience, and not just in terms of difficult coursework, territory-protecting professors, competition with other students, and financial struggles. In the best sense, graduate school can also become a space in which profound intellectual growth takes place. That growth does not always align with the established priorities and requirements of the university. As I wrote in the introduction to a collection of my essays on family television viewing, I had two simultaneous educations in graduate school: one which met the institutional demands and another that I created for myself—which would contribute more directly to my early career as an ethnographer of communication (Lull, 1990).

By the mid-1970s logical positivism and its attendant quantitative research methodologies had reached their peak in the social sciences in the United States, including the latecomer scientific discipline, communication studies. Learning how to use advanced statistics became the core ritual in the rites of passage for graduate students at the major colleges and universities. If you were clever with path analysis, sequential lag analysis, and multiple discriminate analysis, you were considered to be a good student. Other than the historical and literary methodologies assigned to rhetorical analysis, the scientific arm of the communications discipline was driven by quantitative approaches, despite profound limitations on their explanatory potential and the typical slotting of complex human behavior into pre-determined categories.

In part because of my experience as a journalist and media practitioner, I grew increasingly frustrated with the limitations of the impersonal methodological trends that dominated communication studies in the United States at the time. I looked instead to other disciplines in which lines of qualitative

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empirical research had been established—especially sociology, psychology, and anthropology.

Most important was UCLA sociologist Harold Garfinkel's *Studies in ethnomethodology* (1967), a major breakthrough that draws philosophically from Edmund Husserl's humanistic phenomenology (Husserl, 1931) and Alfred Schutz's theory of social intersubjectivity (Schutz, 1967). The ethnomethodological approach documents and explains in microscopic detail precisely how social actors (often unconsciously) carry out (“do”) routine communications activities—do walking, do talking, or do watching television, for example. The “methods” in ethnomethodology refer to the patterned ways people do things, *not* to a research methodology.

Ethnomethodologies enacted by research subjects in everyday behavior can be identified and analyzed by employing qualitative research methodologies typically aligned with fieldwork undertaken in qualitative sociology and anthropology, including ethnography. But a word of caution: The term “ethnography” often gets thrown around too loosely in communication and cultural studies. “Qualitative empirical research” more appropriately describes small-scale studies.

Inspired by the ethnomethodological movement in sociology and the longstanding ethnographic tradition in anthropology, I designed studies in graduate school to investigate the dynamic interface between interpersonal communication and mass communication. In the early to mid-1970s, even relatively unobtrusive qualitative audience research techniques like focus groups did not exist in the industry or the academy in the United States. Commercial ratings services only produced data on the popularity of television stations and shows. Some national surveys generated large-scale statistical reports which were mainly focused on demographic categories related to viewing patterns.

I wanted to know not just *what* people watch but *how* people construct the totality of their everyday experiences with television (their ethnomethods). I began my quest by posing a simple research question: “How do people choose the programs they watch?” In the mid-1970s, the typical American home had one television set, usually located in the shared “living room” or “family room.” Especially at night, television viewing was almost by default a communal experience. There were no computers, internet, smartphones, or social media to compete for family members' leisure time. Cable television had not yet impacted Madison, so only three major TV networks (CBS, NBC, and ABC) and a public television channel were available. Even in homes with multiple TV sets, a “family decision” or “family vote” had been identified in research as the usual means for selecting programs during prime-time viewing hours at night. But how did these decisions or votes take place?

I conducted a pre-arranged, naturalistic experiment with 20 middle-class families in their homes in Madison when all family members could be present. Sitting around the kitchen table together, I gave each family member an index card with a schedule and description of six sets of fictional television programs. I asked them to “go ahead, select the programs your family would watch tonight if these were the available shows.” To document how they made their choices, I turned on a high-quality audio cassette recorder placed in the center of the table and left the room.

I used a task-specific Bales-type verbal interaction coding scheme to analyze the comments made by family members. Categories of talk were distilled from transcripts of those conversations according to family position—fathers, mothers, older children, and younger children. Their comparative willingness to express program preferences, the matrices of agreement on program choices among family members, and verbal displays of power and privilege in their conversations were reported and discussed at various academic conferences and later in a journal article (Lull, 1978).

But limitations that cropped up in the naturalistic experiment convinced me that some deeper, more systematic observational research would be required to get a better picture of family life with television. For instance, my arrival at subjects’ residences to conduct the experiment sometimes interrupted the normal television viewing that was already in progress. More upsetting was the spontaneous behavior of many family members at the conclusion of the *in situ* program-choosing experiment. In several cases, the negotiation of real choices for actual television viewing began even before I left the home. In some cases, that authentic behavior took place while I debriefed other family members about the nature of the research and its scholarly implications.

I was encouraged by witnessing that, after I came into the homes of people completely unknown to me (other than the written invitation to participate in the study and confirmation by telephone), normal television viewing behavior often resumed with me still present in the living space, sometimes in the same room. People seemed to be perfectly comfortable negotiating choices and watching television for real in the presence of a person they had just met. I decided to take a leap in my research on families and television; I would conduct an immersive ethnography of audience behavior in people’s homes (Lull, 1976).

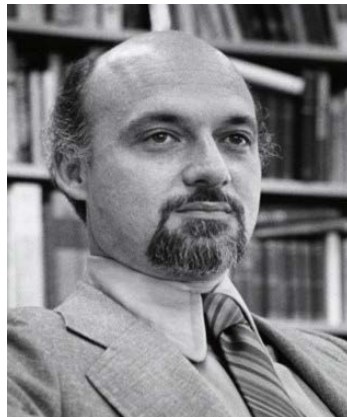
No faculty member in the Department of Communication Arts at Wisconsin-Madison had any experience doing or supervising ethnographic research. In fact, no one in the entire field of communication had that experience at the time. But Edwin Black—a leading American scholar of rhetoric, chairman of the department, and editor of *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*—heartily agreed to advise my thesis research.

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Black had written the groundbreaking volume, *Rhetorical criticism: A study in method*, a decade earlier (Black, 1965). In that book, Professor Black broke with the dominant canon of neo-Aristotelian rhetorical criticism centered on textual analysis, logic, and persuasion to promote a much broader perspective he called the “rhetorical transaction.” Black believed that the critical reading of a text—whether spoken rhetoric, writing, media content, or ethnographic detail—should be a reflective transaction that flows between author and subject. The broad (often political and historical) context and participants’ motives in any communications event ought to be considered much more than traditional rhetorical methods allow. Further, the voice of the rhetorical critic should not be dismissed or disguised but carefully invested in the overall work as style—explicit, prominent, and artful.

Figure 3



Edwin Black disrupted the revered traditions of rhetorical criticism by proposing an alternative methodology to the array of standard topics in the discipline and advocating an expanded range of relevant material to be analyzed. This move was especially timely because public communication was becoming increasingly mediated by technology in the 1970s. Professor Black taught an innovative course at Wisconsin in television criticism, for instance. He welcomed the opportunity to become the first American scholar in communication studies—a rhetorical scholar at that, not a social scientist—to direct an ethnographic thesis. The critical components of ethnographic analysis would be fundamental and familiar to Edwin Black—text (behavior), context (setting), and authors’ voices. I have Edwin Black to thank not only for the guidance and careful reading he provided during the research and writing of my thesis but for encouraging a fierce independence

of mind that can be so lacking in academia. Ed Black remains one of my best imagined critics to this day, a constant presence looking over my shoulder to see what I am writing as I compose any article or essay—including this one!

The foundational article in my empirical research program that followed is “The Social Uses of Television,” originally published in the ICA journal *Human Communication Research* (Lull, 1980). The ethnographic data that were interpreted and organized into the social uses typology draws from my dissertation research and follow-up in-home studies I conducted with my advanced students at the University of California in Santa Barbara. It was becoming clear that people strategically employ three dimensions of their television viewing experience as a structural and relational social resource: the physical form of the medium, its program elements, and contexts for viewing—not only the moments when they would watch television and not just at home. Recently, I compared the social uses of television and the internet across the same three factors—form, content, and context (Lull, 2021).

The 1980s proved to be an exciting period for qualitative media audience research, broadly considered. Seminal research projects and theoretical essays falling under the umbrella of “cultural studies” and “reception studies” were being published and noticed. The work of Dave Morley, Ien Ang, John Fiske, and Janice Radway are prominent examples. Tom Lindlof put together a collection of studies and essays in a volume titled *Natural Audiences* (Lindlof, 1987). At the end of the decade, Nick Jankowski and Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1991) published a useful volume focused on qualitative methodology for mass communication research.

Two other developments in the 1980s were crucial to the directions I have taken as a communications scholar. In 1982, I taught media courses in a “study abroad” program called Semester at Sea, affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh. More than 500 college students, faculty members, and crew departed Seattle, Washington on a cruise ship bound for Kobe, Japan. That was the first leg of a four-month journey that circled the globe. Hong Kong was one of the ports of call. From there, I led a contingent of students into the Peoples’ Republic of China, stopping first in Guangzhou and then proceeding by air to Beijing.

Deng Xiaoping had ascended to the top of the communist government four years before. I was blown away by that cultural experience and became determined to return to China. Getting television sets into every urban home was a key feature of Deng’s modernization plan. To research that transformation, I made three subsequent data-gathering trips to China—1984, 1986, and, by invitation from the People’s University in Beijing a few months after the student-worker uprising, in October, 1989. The product of this research is an ethnography of the role of television in urban Chinese society based on in-depth interviews with

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audience members in four major cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Xian, and Guangzhou), interviews with TV producers and programmers, and textual analysis of key television programs (Lull, 1991). An abridged Portuguese translation of the book was published by Rio Fundo Editora in Brazil (Lull, 1992a).

The initial product of my research on China was an article which appeared in a collection of data-rich qualitative audience studies titled *World Families Watch Television* (Lull, 1988b). Researchers from six countries describe how families in England, Germany, Venezuela, India, the United States, and China interact with television and each other.

Leoncio Barrios was one of the contributors to that edited volume. A professor in the School of Communication at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas, Professor Barrios had asked me to read his doctoral thesis at Columbia University, which was based in part on my *Social uses of television* article. While *World families watch television* was in press, Barrios invited me to give a short course in qualitative social research to professors and graduate students at his university in Venezuela. After attending my seminar, two professors then asked me to present a paper at the Inter-American Congress of the American Psychological Association, which met in Buenos Aires in 1989. Again, one thing led to another—this time it was a trip to neighboring Brazil immediately after the conference in Argentina. Professor William Gomes of the Institute of Psychology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre asked me to speak to his colleagues.

The trip to South America was crucial in shaping the middle part of my career. I had just finished my near decade-long work in and out of China but I had been fascinated for years with Latin America too. The trip to Argentina and Brazil gave me extra incentive to continue collaborating with colleagues there. Until then, my experience in Latin America was limited to a trip I took with a friend from Acapulco, Mexico to San Jose, Costa Rica by bus following the 1980 International Communication Association conference. It was exciting, to say the least, to be an American navigating across El Salvador and Nicaragua in the early days of the Sandinista Revolution. Neither my travel partner nor I spoke Spanish. After returning to California, I was determined to learn to speak Spanish sufficiently well to travel and work in Latin America and Spain. I enrolled in Spanish 1A at Cabrillo College, near Santa Cruz, California, while I resumed my teaching at San Jose State University. I kept working on Spanish as time would allow.

The trajectory of my work beginning around the same time was greatly influenced by two key figures. When visiting Rio de Janeiro after making the presentation in Porto Alegre in 1989, I met the chairman of the Social

Communication department at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Professor Eduardo Neiva. From the start, Eduardo Neiva and I shared great interests in questions of culture and communication, especially concerning their evolutionary roots. His university invited me to join them for a residence as a Fulbright scholar in 1992.

A year later, I also had the great fortune to meet the Mexican communications scholar Guillermo Orozco Gomez at the ICA convention in Dublin, Ireland. That connection led to my first opportunity to make a (very nervous) presentation in Spanish to a group of Guillermo's graduate students in Mexico City. From that moment until now, my academic trajectory has been greatly influenced by my experiences working throughout Latin America and the many colleagues I have been privileged to know.

So far, I have emphasized how many important people and places have influenced my academic career. The "subject-object relationships" reflected in my work, stemming from my particular "epistemic approach," cannot be separated from those people and places. But let me turn now to some of the key authors and theories which have been integrated into the body of my research and writing.

I have titled this piece *From ethnography to evolution*. Earlier, I described how the travels, academic literature, and experiences I had doing empirical work drew from and contributed to the ethnographic perspective I was developing on human communication. The qualitative studies I conducted and the lectures and seminars I gave were all explicitly influenced by the political, social, and cultural settings and movements where and when the work was done. For instance, the book about China concerned the effects television had in a unique political-cultural context. But all my research projects and writings centered on media, communication, and culture all describe communication processes that take place in a wide variety of specific cultural contexts.

My journalistic experience imbued me with great respect for reporting and interpreting verifiable facts. That put me at odds to varying degrees with much cultural studies research being conducted at the same time my own qualitative work was being published. I never identified myself as a "cultural studies researcher" but, for very different reasons, I was not a typical American "social scientist" either.

As my career progressed, I found myself in many ways more intellectually and culturally comfortable with my colleagues in Latin America than I do with many Northerners—but I have never found a completely agreeable resting place. Epistemological discord occupied both hemispheres around the turn of last century: much American social scientific research was empirically narrow and not sufficiently informed by theory, certainly not critical theory. The clear emphasis

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on the American side was on quantitative methodology and big, well-funded, conventional research programs. In the Latin world, emphasis concentrated on theory, mainly on its Marxist variants. For my taste, insufficient empirical research was being conducted in communications in Latin America and Marxist theory was far too deterministic and pessimistic. My own ethnographic work revealed that audiences, and everyday social actors in general, are far more creative and resourceful than typically acknowledged. Moreover, most critical theory—in mainstream Latin America and in the political-economic critique emanating mainly from Europe and the United States—was driven more by political motives than empirical data.

These are among the reasons I was motivated to give short courses and workshops in qualitative empirical research methods and theory development at many universities in Latin America. This is where my connection with USP developed. At the kind invitation of Professor Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes, I gave a short course titled “Cultural Studies, Ethnography, and Media Reception” in August of 2000 for faculty and students in the School of Communication Sciences and Arts.

But eight years prior to that while in residence in Rio de Janeiro as a Fulbright scholar, I gave two presentations at Intercom in São Paulo. One of those papers, *Estructuración de las audiencias masivas*, represented a theoretical position I advocated that applies the principles of Anthony Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory to the study of media audiences (Lull, 1992b). Essentially, structuration theory integrates macrosocial conditions (reflecting the constraints of structure) with everyday microsocial processes (where agency takes form). Structuration theory proved to be particularly useful because it explains how structure and agency should not be thought of as entirely opposing forces. Too much emphasis on structure exaggerates constraint, making it seem that established social institutions and rules somehow determine people’s realities in an airtight fashion. But too much attention to agency grants unwarranted power to individuals and underestimates how dominant forces influence individuals and societies, often against their interests.

This undetermined and dynamic relationship accords with interpretations I had made in the ethnographic work I had been doing for many years, especially my research in China and the social uses research program generally: (1) Media structures are not monolithic; they shape the audience’s worldview but, as social institutions, they are composed of human beings with diverse motives and behavior and (2) Media audiences are not dupes but they do not act with unbridled agency either. Structuration finds a theoretical

“sweet spot” that provides the right weighting of agency and structure in the explanation of social behavior.

During the peak of my work in Latin America, the work of three authors in particular offered attractive alternatives to standard research and theory in communication. Their positions were broadly compatible with structuration theory and became extremely important in my own thinking and writing about communication and culture. In no particular order, these authors and their seminal works are likely very familiar to you: Néstor García Canclini (1989, 1995), Jesús Martín-Barbero (1987), and Jorge A. González (1994).

THE EVOLUTIONARY TURN

When done well, ethnographies and other qualitative empirical research projects can give communications researchers close-up views of how structure and agency interact in the everyday lives of media audience members or any other population of interest. In my research on media audiences over the years, the concept that kept recurring is “resource.” The “social uses of television perspective” focuses on how people (consciously and subconsciously) employ the form, content, and context of the electronic medium as resources. But social actors exercise their agency within at least three types of structure. A *social structure* refers to relationships among those who co-occupy the living space. Social actors are also subject to the *physical structure*, represented by the living spaces and specific forms domestic technology takes. Media users are further disposed to the *ideological structures* that govern media institutions and occupy program content.

Researchers employing ethnographic and other social scientific methodologies describe and analyze their findings on media audiences and other social configurations in ways that can be interpreted in various ways theoretically. Some combination of social structure and cultural norms, often operationalized as independent or intervening variables, are identified as the causal agents of human behavior. But that assumption fails to acknowledge that society and culture themselves have been shaped over the long course of our biological history. Society and culture are *proximate* causes of human behavior not *ultimate* causes.

Human involvement with communications technology—especially the social uses to which the technologies are put—are driven by motivations that run deeper than those typically described in research articles. In my view, human behavior can best be explained as adaptations grounded in the

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principles of evolutionary theory. I was first greatly inspired to take this turn in my writing by carefully reading Charles Darwin's most important works—*The Origin of Species*, *The Descent of Man*, and *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*.

Eduardo Neiva—the Brazilian-American communication scholar I met in Rio more than 30 years ago—and I have been formally and informally working both independently and together along this line for many years. We published a piece on the topic in **MATRIZes** (Lull & Neiva, 2008) and a book in which we offer an explanation of how communication drives human evolution (Lull & Neiva, 2012). In an attempt to provide greater visibility for this perspective, I recently wrote a textbook (Lull, 2020) and a journal article (Lull, 2022) that introduces “evolutionary communication” to a wider audience.

Figure 4



The evolutionary approach to analyzing human communication emerges from a platform of principles which have been established over many decades of research on organic evolution. The standard theory of evolution—sometimes called neo-Darwinian theory or the modern synthesis—is derived from Charles Darwin's original insights about natural and sexual selection together with the basic principles of genetics. Epigenetic evolutionary theory—often called the extended synthesis—focuses on how internal biology and the external environment interact to influence genetic and behavioral expression. The third explanatory stage moves through genes, biology more broadly, and the physical environment to focus on processes of human interaction and the making of meaning—evolutionary communication. ■

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