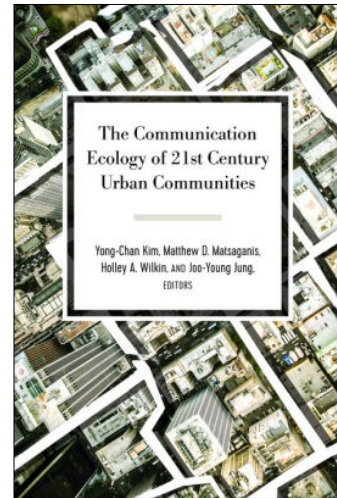


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The Communication Ecology of 21st Century Urban Communities is an intellectual history of the Metamorphosis Project (Meta) and compendium of key works in the 21-year tradition of Meta’s flagship communication infrastructure theory (CIT). The volume includes twelve chapters divided into three parts on theory and method, CIT research, and applied CIT-based interventions, along with a prologue by Meta’s founder, Sandra Ball-Rokeach, and introduction and epilogue by the volume’s four coeditors, Yong-Chan Kim, Matthew D. Matsaganis, Holley A. Wilkin, and Joo-Young Jung. Featuring contributions from a total of 19 authors, this book was published as part of editor Gary Gumpert’s *Urban Communication* series at Peter Lang.



The volume points back to Meta’s legacy of research conducted with 140 graduate students between 1998 and 2018 as a way forward to understand 21st-century urban communities. This is a timely exercise because Meta appears to have closed with the retirement of Ball-Rokeach in June 2018. The volume addresses Meta’s founding question of whether place-based community still matters. It answers with a resounding yes, based on two decades of findings. But the contribution then and now has always been how place matters. Place matters in terms of a local ecology of communication. This ecology joins community at multiple levels to enable a shared sense of being and engagement and action towards common goals. For urban scholars of various disciplinary backgrounds, the volume elaborates upon a theoretical framework (a storytelling network within a communication action context) and research design (mixed methods of data collection for multiple levels of analysis) to study urban communities from the perspective of communication.

Meta’s Origins

In the prologue, Ball-Rokeach explains the origins of Meta in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Meta would provide “a communication perspective to the analysis of contemporary urban conflicts and how they might be addressed” (p. xiv). Ball-Rokeach also envisioned Meta in response to two prevailing scholarly themes at the time—the erosion of local political power, a trend she saw playing out in Los Angeles, and an explanation she flatly rejected, namely that globalization and the Internet spelled the end of place-based community.

Meta formed as a commitment to the capacity of local community, borrowing inspiration from the figure of the community organizer. Community organizers told stories about their neighborhood to mobilize community action. Ball-Rokeach extrapolated a theoretical framework. All urban communities have a

communication infrastructure that includes a storytelling network of local residents, community-based organizations, and local/ethnic media within a structural context that either enables or constrains the action of the network. In storytelling, CIT scholars distilled a communication process that explained how community engagement actually worked or could work.

Sociological Research on "Neighborhood Effects"

This conceptual model was a major breakthrough that explained through communication where urban sociologists had left off. Urban sociology flourished in the nineties under the banner of "neighborhood effects" (for further discussion, see Matsaganis, 2015). In 1997, when Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls published in *Science* their findings from a multilevel study of 343 Chicago neighborhoods, the concept of collective efficacy was introduced to explain the link between poverty and crime. The authors described collective efficacy in terms of social trust between neighbors willing to intervene in problem situations. They found that collective efficacy predicted perceived and actual neighborhood crime levels as well as self-reported crime victimization. Seventy percent of the variance in collective efficacy was explained by three composite neighborhood variables: concentrated disadvantage (a negative correlate), immigrant concentration (negative), and residential stability (positive). But a number of questions were left unanswered in this research. Why did neighborhoods that measured similarly on the composite variables still show different levels of collective efficacy? Was collective efficacy limited to crime stopping? Did collective efficacy depend on working relationships between residents and police, service providers, street gangs, or other organizations? In other words, where did collective efficacy come from within the community, and what was it beyond a sense of trust and action?

Communication as the Missing Connective Tissue

Communication was missing as the focus; instead "implied in the examination of social mechanisms of neighborhood effects" (Matsaganis, 2015, pp. 34–35; see also Katz & Hampton, 2016). Neighborhood effects developed on a track separate from communication. Five years after the *Science* article, when Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002) assessed the burgeoning literature and next directions for neighborhood effects research, the authors made no mention of the terms *communication*, *technology*, or *media*—only mediating variables and mediated effects.

Meanwhile, Meta had conceptualized communication as the connective tissue of an urban neighborhood; a social process fundamental not only to collective efficacy but to social control and civic engagement generally (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). As the works included in this volume repeatedly demonstrate, a communication infrastructure and resources are key to understanding and addressing urban problems of all types from crime to health disparities to natural disasters.

Future of Urban Communication

Although the volume establishes the necessity of communication in urban studies, it leaves open the question of who and what will assume the post-Meta mantle of urban communication, a concern for the communication discipline in the absence of dedicated divisions of the International Communication

Association (ICA) or National Communication Association (NCA). One suggestion from Hampton and Katz (2015) is the recoupling of communication and sociology as per the first Chicago School. This disciplinary integration implies shifts on both sides. For urban sociology, neighborhoods would need to be conceptualized as holistic communication environments inclusive of the local/ethnic media, digitally mediated communication, and face-to-face interactions that link residents and stakeholders and shape meanings of place. As the title of Lewis A. Friedland's chapter suggests, for CIT scholars to move "toward an integrated urban sociology of communication" would mean thinking beyond the localism of neighborhoods, what Ball-Rokeach calls the theory's defining strength and weakness. Friedland discusses urban research that separates community from neighborhood (Wellman, 1999) by looking at community in terms of the personal networks of individuals, which rarely correspond to neighborhood boundaries (see also Lu, 2019). How can CIT scholars better account for the ways that urban residents live, work, and draw upon resources outside the neighborhoods in which they live that are located elsewhere in the city or even the world? Another issue relates to the sometimes limited nature of neighborhood communication. Given the parochialism of many neighborhoods (Hampton & Wellman, 2018) shaped by legacies of racial segregation (Sampson, 2012), where are the communication ecologies that encompass more cosmopolitan and intercultural parts of the city (Anderson, 2011; Georgiou, 2016)? Exposure to diversity and the integration of social networks may be especially important communication work for 21st-century urban communities.

The Communication Ecology of 21st Century Urban Communities does not delve into these challenges. Instead it lays out the unique contribution of communication to the study of urban problems—a tradition that has not yet received its due within or beyond the communication discipline. To this end, the volume extends the vital, generous legacy of Meta by providing researchers and practitioners with tools and study models to create robust studies of urban communities and capacity-enhancing partnerships.

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