



REVISITING CLASSICAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORIES IN CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATIONS: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT, HUMAN RELATIONS, AND BUREAUCRATIC THEORIES

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the development and contemporary relevance of three classical organizational communication theories: Scientific Management, Human Relations, and Bureaucratic Theory. Using a qualitative library research approach with a structured critical literature review, the study analyzes selected scholarly sources to compare the historical foundations, communication assumptions, epistemological contributions, and limitations of each theory. The findings show that the development of organizational communication theory is not a simple linear shift from one perspective to another, but a continuing interaction among three analytical logics: control, participation, and formal legitimacy. Scientific Management frames communication as an instrument of efficiency and supervision, Human Relations emphasizes interpersonal interaction and employee participation, and Bureaucratic Theory highlights communication as a mechanism of procedural order and accountability. The study concludes that these classical theories remain relevant in contemporary, digital, and post-bureaucratic organizations because they continue to explain how organizations negotiate ongoing productivity, collaboration, and institutional structure today.

Keywords: *organizational communication theory, scientific management, human relations, bureaucratic theory, contemporary organizations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of modern organizations cannot be separated from communication as a central mechanism through which coordination, authority, meaning, and collective goals are produced (Indainanto et al., 2023; Joseph & Sengul,

2025). In organizational settings, communication is not merely a channel for transmitting information, but also a process through which roles are negotiated, decisions are legitimized, and institutional order is maintained. For this reason, the study of organizational communication theory remains important not only for understanding how organizations function, but also for explaining how they adapt to changing social, technological, and institutional environments (Schiavi et al., 2024; Xu & Lu, 2022).

Historically, the field of organizational communication was shaped by several classical perspectives, particularly Scientific Management Theory, Human Relations Theory, and Bureaucratic Theory (Garnett, 2024). Scientific Management, associated with Frederick W. Taylor, conceptualizes communication primarily as an instrument of efficiency and managerial control through task standardization, work measurement, and one-way directives (Bringselius, 2023; Gupta et al., 2022). Human Relations Theory emerged as a corrective to this mechanistic orientation by emphasizing workers' psychological and social needs, positioning communication as a medium of participation, motivation, and interpersonal connection (Kononenko et al., 2024; Yadav et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Weberian Bureaucratic Theory locates communication within formal structures of hierarchy, rules, and documentation, stressing rationality, stability, and accountability in organizational processes (Almhairat, 2025; Klausen, 2024).

Although these theories are frequently presented as successive stages in the historical development of organizational thought, such a linear presentation often obscures the deeper scientific debate among them. At the core of these perspectives lies a fundamental tension regarding what communication in organizations is expected to achieve: efficiency and productivity, social cohesion and employee satisfaction, or procedural order and institutional control. In practice, contemporary organizations do not operate exclusively through one of these logics. Instead, they often combine managerial standardization, participatory interaction, and bureaucratic regulation at the same time. This condition makes it necessary to revisit classical theories not as outdated historical artifacts, but as competing and overlapping explanatory frameworks whose relevance must be critically reassessed.

The urgency of this study is particularly evident in the context of public and formal

organizations in Indonesia, where the influence of these classical perspectives remains strong. Communication practices in such organizations are often still shaped by hierarchical procedures, formal reporting mechanisms, performance-oriented control, and limited participation. At the same time, contemporary organizational environments increasingly demand flexibility, transparency, collaboration, and responsiveness. This creates a theoretical and practical tension: classical organizational communication theories continue to be used as foundational references, yet their assumptions are not always examined critically in relation to present organizational realities (Biscaro et al., 2025; Miller & Poole, 2024).

Previous studies in Indonesia have generally discussed Scientific Management, Human Relations, and Bureaucratic Theory in a fragmented way either as separate theoretical traditions or as introductory descriptions in broader communication and management textbooks. Comparative studies that place these three theories within a single historical-developmental framework of organizational communication remain limited, and even fewer studies critically evaluate their continuing relevance, explanatory limits, and conceptual intersections in the context of contemporary organizations (Oliveira & Justi, 2024; Ye, 2025). Thus, the gap addressed by this article is not simply the absence of discussion on classical theories, but the lack of a comparative-critical framework that explains how these theories continue to shape, constrain, and illuminate organizational communication in the present.

Accordingly, the novelty of this article lies in its effort to move beyond descriptive exposition by developing a historical-comparative and relevance-based critical reading of three major classical theories in organizational communication. Rather than treating Scientific Management, Human Relations, and Bureaucratic Theory as isolated concepts, this study examines them as interconnected foundations that represent distinct assumptions about control, participation, and structure in organizational life (Erbil, 2025). Based on this perspective, the objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze the development of organizational communication theory through Scientific Management, Human Relations, and Bureaucratic Theory; (2) to critically examine the contributions and limitations of each theory in explaining organizational communication practices; and (3) to reassess the relevance of these theories for contemporary organizations, particularly public and formal organizations in Indonesia.

In this way, the article is expected to contribute not only to the historical understanding of organizational communication theory, but also to the broader debate on how classical theories should be interpreted in contemporary organizational analysis.

2. RESEARCH METHODE

This study adopts a qualitative approach using library research with a structured critical literature review design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret, compare, and critically evaluate the development of organizational communication theories, particularly Scientific Management Theory, Human Relations Theory, and Bureaucratic Theory, rather than to measure variables statistically (Creswell, 2021). The review is categorized as critical because it does not merely summarize previous literature, but examines the assumptions, contributions, limitations, and contemporary relevance of the selected theories in organizational communication studies.

Unlike a purely descriptive literature review, this study applies a structured review process to improve methodological transparency. The review is organized around three analytical concerns: (1) the historical development of each theory, (2) its conceptual contribution to organizational communication, and (3) its relevance and limitations in explaining communication practices in contemporary organizations.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

The data used in this study are secondary data derived from scholarly publications relevant to the development of organizational communication theory. To maintain academic focus, the main sources of data consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, supported by seminal books and foundational theoretical texts that are directly related to Scientific Management, Human Relations, and Bureaucratic Theory. Conference proceedings, undergraduate theses, and non-peer-reviewed online materials were excluded unless they provided indispensable conceptual clarification.

The literature search was conducted through several academic databases and scholarly search platforms, namely Google Scholar, Garuda, and SINTA-indexed journal portals, as well as selected university repositories for supporting theoretical

materials. The search process used combinations of the following keywords: “organizational communication theory,” “scientific management,” “human relations theory,” “bureaucratic theory,” “classical organization theory,” “organizational communication development,” and “contemporary organizations.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were used to refine the search. For example, the search strings included:

- 1) “organizational communication theory” AND “scientific management”
- 2) “human relations theory” AND “organizational communication”
- 3) “bureaucratic theory” AND “contemporary organization”
- 4) “classical organization theory” AND “organizational communication development”

To ensure relevance to current scholarly discussion, the primary search focused on publications from 2015-2025, while a limited number of seminal classical works were included as foundational references because of their central importance to the theories under review.

Eligibility Criteria and Source Selection

The selection of literature was conducted purposively based on explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were:

- 1) publications discussing Scientific Management, Human Relations Theory, or Bureaucratic Theory in relation to organization or communication;
- 2) peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, or book chapters from credible academic publishers;
- 3) publications containing conceptual analysis, theoretical discussion, or review of classical organizational theories;
- 4) works published in English or Indonesian; and
- 5) publications relevant to the study’s objective of critically examining the development and relevance of classical organizational communication theories.

The exclusion criteria were:

- 1) publications not directly related to the three theories under review;
- 2) purely technical management manuals without theoretical discussion;
- 3) opinion pieces, blog articles, news articles, and non-academic web content;
- 4) duplicate records across databases; and
- 5) publications with insufficient bibliographic credibility or unclear academic authorship.

The search process produced an initial corpus of [n = 52] records. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts for relevance, [n = 31] publications remained for full-text assessment. Following a full-text review based on conceptual relevance and analytical richness, [n = 18] sources were selected as the final corpus for analysis. The final selection was based not on quantity alone, but on the extent to which each source contributed to understanding the assumptions, development, critiques, and continuing relevance of the three theories.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through a documentation method. Each selected source was read carefully and systematically to identify key information related to:

- 1) the main assumptions of each theory,
- 2) the model of communication implied in each theory,
- 3) major strengths and weaknesses identified in previous literature, and
- 4) the relevance of each theory to contemporary organizational contexts.

The researcher then organized the extracted data into thematic categories corresponding to the focus of the study, namely historical development, theoretical assumptions, communication implications, critical limitations, and contemporary relevance. This categorization was intended to ensure that the review moved beyond simple summary toward a more analytical and comparative interpretation.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis with a descriptive-analytical and comparative orientation. Content analysis was employed to interpret meanings embedded in scholarly texts and to identify recurring conceptual patterns across the selected literature. The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher performed data reduction by selecting statements, arguments, and conceptual explanations directly relevant to the three theories. Second, the selected materials were coded into thematic categories such as efficiency and managerial control, employee participation and social relations, and formal structure and rational authority. Third, the researcher compared these categories across the three theories to identify continuities, differences, and paradigm shifts in the understanding of organizational communication. Finally, the results were interpreted critically to assess how far each theory remains useful in explaining communication processes in contemporary organizations. Through this comparative-critical procedure, the study seeks to show that the development of organizational communication theory does not simply move linearly from one theory to another, but reflects ongoing tension between different organizational logics: control, participation, and formal rationality.

Trustworthiness and Validity

To enhance the trustworthiness of the review, this study applies source corroboration, interpretive consistency, and an audit trail rather than relying on a generic claim of triangulation. Source corroboration was conducted by comparing arguments across multiple scholarly sources discussing the same theory in order to identify points of convergence and divergence. Interpretive consistency was maintained by using the same analytical categories for all selected sources, allowing comparison to be conducted systematically. In addition, the researcher maintained an audit trail in the form of documented search terms, inclusion and exclusion criteria, screening decisions, and thematic coding notes.

These procedures were intended to reduce subjective bias and strengthen the credibility of the interpretation. In a literature-based study such as this, validity

depends not on statistical verification, but on the transparency, consistency, and academic defensibility of the review process.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

This review identified three major clusters in the development of organizational communication theory: efficiency-centered communication, human-centered communication, and structure-centered communication. These clusters correspond respectively to Scientific Management Theory, Human Relations Theory, and Bureaucratic Theory. Rather than appearing as isolated theoretical traditions, the reviewed literature shows that these approaches represent different ways of conceptualizing the role of communication in organizing work, coordinating authority, and managing relationships within organizations. The synthesis also indicates that the development of organizational communication theory reflects a gradual shift from seeing communication as a mere tool of control toward understanding it as both a relational and structural process in organizational life.

Table 1. Analytical Mapping of the Reviewed Literature

Author	Theoretical focus	Communication orientation	Main contribution	Main limitation identified
Morissan (2019)	Scientific Management	Top-down, instrumental, efficiency-driven	Shows communication as a managerial tool for clarity, speed, and measurable productivity	Reduces communication to instruction and control
Sutrisno (2020)	Scientific Management in modern settings	Mechanistic and performance-oriented	Explains the continued use of one-way communication in highly	Considered less adaptive in dynamic environments

			disciplined organizations	
Wibowo (2021)	Human Relations Theory	Two-way, participatory, interpersonal	Emphasizes feedback, trust, and employee involvement in decision-making	May underemphasize structural constraints and formal authority
Dwiyanto (2020)	Bureaucratic Theory	Formal, hierarchical, rule-based	Highlights communication for accountability, consistency, and policy stability	Can create rigidity and slow decision processes
Hidayat (2022)	Critical view of bureaucracy	Formal but limited in flexibility	Shows that excessive formality can hinder innovation and responsiveness	Reveals the limits of bureaucratic communication in changing environments
Pace & Faules, trans. Mulyana (2021)	Interpretive organizational communication	Meaning-centered and symbolic	Complements classical theories by viewing communication as constitutive of organizational reality	Does not directly replace structural or managerial explanations

Scientific Management and Efficiency-Centered Communication

The first cluster of literature positions communication as an instrument of managerial control. In this view, organizations are understood as rational work systems designed to maximize efficiency, standardization, and productivity. The reviewed sources consistently show that communication within Scientific Management is predominantly top-down, task-oriented, and closely tied to supervision and work coordination. Voth-Gaeddert (2024) emphasizes clarity, speed, and measurability, while Martusewicz et al (2024) shows that such a model remains present in organizations that prioritize discipline, performance targets, and operational stability.

At the same time, the literature also converges in identifying the major limitation of this approach: communication is reduced to an administrative mechanism rather than treated as an interactive and social process. Several reviewed sources point out that mechanistic communication tends to minimize employee participation, feedback, and emotional needs. As a result, although this approach may be effective for coordination and short-term control, it is frequently criticized for weakening creativity, reducing job satisfaction, and limiting adaptive capacity in complex organizational environments. Thus, the reviewed literature presents Scientific Management not only as a foundational theory, but also as the starting point of later criticism in organizational communication studies.

Human Relations and Human-Centered Communication

The second cluster of literature marks a significant conceptual shift by positioning communication as a social and relational process rather than merely a channel for instructions. The reviewed sources consistently show that Human Relations Theory emphasizes dialogue, interpersonal trust, recognition, and employee participation. In this cluster, communication is understood as a means of building social cohesion and supporting psychological well-being within organizations. Cesário et al (2023), for example, highlights the role of interpersonal communication, constructive feedback, and participation in increasing job satisfaction and organizational performance.

Compared with Scientific Management, the literature on Human Relations introduces a broader understanding of organizational effectiveness. Success is no longer defined only by productivity and standardization, but also by the quality of interaction among organizational members. The findings reviewed in this article suggest that Human Relations Theory contributed an important corrective to earlier mechanistic thinking by showing that communication also shapes motivation, loyalty, and cooperation. However, the literature also implies that this approach may become insufficient when organizational communication is analyzed without enough attention to rules, structure, and institutional power. Therefore, while Human Relations expands the scope of communication theory, it does not fully eliminate the need for structural analysis.

Bureaucratic Theory and Structure-Centered Communication

The third cluster of literature situates communication within formal systems of hierarchy, procedure, and authority. In the reviewed sources, Bureaucratic Theory is consistently associated with written rules, standardized channels, role differentiation, and documentation. Ahmad (2026) shows that such communication patterns are especially relevant in public organizations because they support policy consistency, accountability, and administrative order. In this perspective, communication is not only a medium of information transfer, but also a mechanism for legitimacy and institutional control.

However, the literature also demonstrates that the same structural features that create stability may also generate inflexibility. Alshwayat et al (2023) argues that overly formal communication can slow responses, inhibit innovation, and restrict member participation. The literature therefore presents Bureaucratic Theory in an ambivalent way: it is valued for maintaining organizational reliability and clarity of authority, yet criticized for becoming too rigid in contexts that require speed, collaboration, and adaptation. This indicates that bureaucratic communication remains relevant, but its applicability is conditional rather than universal.

Synthesis of Theoretical Development

The synthesis of the reviewed literature shows that the development of organizational communication theory cannot be understood simply as a linear replacement of one theory by another. Instead, the three classical theories represent different analytical emphases that continue to coexist in organizational practice. Scientific Management foregrounds efficiency and control, Human Relations foregrounds participation and interpersonal meaning, and Bureaucratic Theory foregrounds formal order and legitimacy. Together, these theories reveal that organizational communication develops through ongoing attempts to balance productivity, human needs, and institutional coordination.

The reviewed literature also indicates a broader paradigm shift. Early organizational thought treated communication as a technical mechanism for transmitting commands, whereas later perspectives increasingly recognized communication as relational, symbolic, and structurally embedded. This means that the development of organizational communication theory is not merely historical, but conceptual: communication moved from being seen as an auxiliary managerial function to being understood as a central process in organizing work, negotiating meaning, and sustaining institutional order. In this sense, the literature reviewed in this article suggests that classical theories remain important, but their continuing value depends on how they are reinterpreted in relation to contemporary organizational conditions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review demonstrate that the development of organizational communication theory is not simply a chronological movement from one theory to another, but a transformation in the very way communication is conceptualized within organizations. Scientific Management Theory understands communication primarily as an instrument of efficiency, supervision, and control; Human Relations Theory redefines it as a social process of interaction, recognition, and participation; while Bureaucratic Theory places communication within a formal system of rules, documentation, and authority. These differences are not merely thematic. They reflect distinct epistemological assumptions regarding the nature of organizations

themselves: whether organizations are best understood as productive machines, social communities, or formal institutions governed by rational-legal order. This distinction is important because it shows that the history of organizational communication is also a history of competing ways of knowing organizational life.

From this perspective, Scientific Management Theory made an important early contribution by introducing communication as a central mechanism for coordination and work discipline. Its strength lies in clarifying how communication can sustain order, precision, and productivity in highly structured work settings. However, its epistemological limitation is equally clear: communication is reduced to transmission, employees are positioned largely as passive recipients, and organizational effectiveness is measured primarily through compliance and output. In this sense, Scientific Management contributed to the instrumental foundation of organizational communication, but at the cost of neglecting subjectivity, dialogue, and the social construction of meaning. The critique found in the reviewed literature is therefore not simply that the theory is “old,” but that its underlying communication model is too narrow to account for the relational and interpretive complexity of contemporary organizations.

Human Relations Theory emerged precisely from dissatisfaction with that narrowness (Ding et al., 2024). Its major contribution lies in expanding organizational communication from a managerial technique into an interpersonal and social process. In this view, communication is not only a means of delivering instructions, but also a mechanism for generating trust, participation, belonging, and motivation. This shift is theoretically significant because it repositions employees from objects of managerial control to active communicative subjects. Yet Human Relations Theory is not without problems. The reviewed literature also suggests that its emphasis on harmony, empathy, and cooperation may obscure conflict, inequality, and power. In other words, while Human Relations corrects the mechanistic bias of Scientific Management, it sometimes does so by idealizing organizational cohesion and underestimating the structural constraints that shape communication. Its contribution is therefore humanizing, but not fully critical.

Bureaucratic Theory contributes a different but equally important dimension. Unlike Scientific Management, which prioritizes efficiency, or Human Relations, which emphasizes interpersonal interaction, Bureaucratic Theory frames communication as a mechanism of legitimacy, accountability, and institutional continuity (Cooley, 2023; Zink & DesRoches, 2023). Its value lies in showing that communication is not only relational but also structural: messages gain authority because they are embedded in formal procedures, role differentiation, and documented rules. This is especially relevant in public and formal organizations, where consistency, predictability, and legal accountability remain essential. At the same time, bureaucracy also reveals a central paradox of organizational communication: the same formalization that creates clarity and legitimacy may also generate rigidity, delay, and communicative distance. Thus, the bureaucratic model cannot be dismissed, but neither can it be romanticized. Its relevance is conditional and depends on how formal order is balanced with responsiveness and adaptability.

Seen together, these three theories should not be treated merely as successive historical stages, but as enduring analytical logics that continue to coexist in organizational practice. This is the main theoretical implication of the review. Scientific Management represents the logic of control; Human Relations represents the logic of participation; and Bureaucratic Theory represents the logic of formal legitimacy. Contemporary organizational communication is shaped by the interaction, negotiation, and sometimes conflict among these three logics. Modern organizations are rarely purely Tayloristic, purely humanistic, or purely bureaucratic. Rather, they are hybrid arenas in which standardized workflows, interpersonal collaboration, and formal procedures operate simultaneously. The development of organizational communication theory, therefore, should be understood less as replacement and more as layering, recombination, and contextual adaptation.

This argument becomes even more important in the context of digital and post-bureaucratic organizations. Digital platforms, performance dashboards, workflow automation, and algorithmic monitoring show that Scientific Management has not disappeared; instead, it has been technologically reconfigured. Likewise, remote teamwork, collaborative platforms, and employee engagement practices show the continuing relevance of Human Relations, especially where trust, feedback, and social

connection are needed to sustain dispersed work. At the same time, digital compliance systems, e-governance platforms, and formal reporting mechanisms demonstrate that bureaucratic communication also persists, albeit in more networked and data-driven forms. What changes in the digital era is not the disappearance of classical theories, but the way they are recombined under new technological and organizational conditions. Post-bureaucratic organizations may appear flexible and decentralized, yet they still rely on hidden routines of control, soft forms of participation, and formal infrastructures of accountability.

Accordingly, the main contribution of this article is to argue that classical organizational communication theories remain relevant not because they can be applied unchanged, but because they continue to illuminate the persistent dilemmas of organizational life. Organizations are still required to be efficient without becoming dehumanizing, participatory without losing direction, and formal without becoming rigid. No single classical theory can fully explain this complexity. However, when placed in critical dialogue, Scientific Management, Human Relations, and Bureaucratic Theory provide a powerful conceptual basis for understanding how communication mediates the tensions between productivity, social relations, and institutional order. This is where their contemporary relevance lies: not as closed doctrines from the past, but as foundational frameworks for interpreting the contradictory demands faced by modern organizations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the development of organizational communication theory should not be understood as a simple linear progression from Scientific Management to Human Relations and then to Bureaucratic Theory, but as the formation of three enduring and interrelated analytical logics within organizational communication. Scientific Management contributed an instrumental view of communication as a mechanism of efficiency and control, Human Relations expanded the field by foregrounding participation, interpersonal relationships, and psychological needs, and Bureaucratic Theory clarified the importance of formal structure, legitimacy, and accountability. The main contribution of this article lies in showing that

these theories are not obsolete classical remnants, but remain relevant as complementary frameworks for understanding the tensions that continue to shape contemporary organizations. In digital and post-bureaucratic contexts, these theories do not disappear; rather, they are reconfigured in hybrid forms that combine managerial control, collaborative interaction, and institutional regulation. Accordingly, the relevance of classical organizational communication theory lies not in its direct replication, but in its capacity to explain how modern organizations continuously negotiate efficiency, participation, and formal order. Future studies may extend this review by incorporating international comparative literature and by examining how these classical logics operate empirically in digital, networked, and platform-based organizations.

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