

# “Smith’s Social Cybernetic Strategies for Asynchronous Learning”: Implications of Social Cybernetics Theory of Communication

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## ABSTRACT

Social Cybernetics Theory encompasses qualities of scientific theory. With social tracking as its conceptual framework, the theory suggests that individuals use feedback controls through sensory mechanisms by using orientation-stimulus-process-response (OSPR) in tracking partner’s movements and conversations following a feedback loop. The scientific characteristics of social cybernetics are argued for its robust explanation, embodiment of models and functional relationship, parsimony, openness, hypothetical statements, among other characteristics discussed.

Application of the theory in synchronous situations is perceived as an ordinary practice in communication and interaction with face-to-face individuals engaging in feedback controls with their social targets. The problem arises in asynchronous learning when behavioral communication is mediated by technology resulting from problem with context specificity, lack of tactile feedback mechanisms between machine and human such as the case in space workstation citation which deems computer-human interaction so relevant so that errors are minimized, and in the case of conversations using cellphone that distracts a driver compared to in-vehicle conversations that entail effective social tracking with both driver and passenger cognizant of surrounding situations such as traffic thereby eliciting feedback controls more effectively.

In view of human-human and machine-human feedback mechanisms explained, the author of this article asks some challenging ways as to how humans satisfy meaningful tracking that is socially acceptable. Human nature is not a fixed set of assumptions that will have direct answers in a given causal relationship. Harder it may seem in ordinary circumstances, it is indeed, even more difficult in online interaction when conversation is mediated by technology. Just as how this article implies social cybernetics to be difficult in asynchronous application, it presents the same question of social equilibrium in mediated interaction. However, with the preponderance of online learning platforms, social tracking should evolve as a common practice with developments in Learning Management Systems (LMS) being done.

The journal article, "Social Cybernetic Strategies for Asynchronous Learning" by Thomas J. Smith underpins Social Cybernetics Theory as applied in asynchronous, computer-mediated learning. Social Cybernetics Theory espouses that social interaction among individuals in a group follows a closed loop system where each individual tracks interaction and movement of other individuals through a feedback-controlled process described as social tracking. Mutual compliance of sensory feedbacks from both groups articulates a social interlocking mechanism exemplifying social integration of interaction and behavioral movement.

One of the hallmarks of communication science evident in the article is the concept of models. Social cybernetics is discussed using conceptual models which include a structural model (different modes of social tracking illustrating different modes of feedback control such as individual-group, intragroup, intergroup, mediated counseling, matched, series-lined, shadowing, and relative modes). Another conceptual model applied in the article is symbolic process model that uses social tracking as its main analysis in forming behavior based on feedback control. Several other principles highlight symbolic process model such as projective control principle defining predictive consequences of actions that rely on past actions; motor control of cognition and learning which asserts control of feedback as a result of complex social interaction challenges; context specificity in cognition and learning which claims relative ergonomic design features of the learning community (Smith, 2006).

Furthermore, explanatory models are not independent concepts but are related to the general idea of social tracking as a mechanism that highlights feedback controls in managing social situations in face-to-face situation except in asynchronous learning where said conceptual models raise doubts in applicability. A very clear example can illustrate the problem: two persons interacting in person will likely be more sensitive to each other's manner of speaking, in effect, social tracking becomes more accurate as opposed to social tracking mediated by technology that raises distance issue with diminishes social interaction bringing negative impact on social tracking.

Next, the concept of explanation defining scientific communication theory is largely understood in terms of its pattern of regularity as a general principle widely accepted by many. In social cybernetics, social tracking is a generally understood phenomenon that occurs in ordinary conversation between people. There is a natural tendency for humans to decipher actions, responses including nuances of the persons we talk to and we normally react based on interpretations of those stimuli. Hence, social tracking is an isomorphic principle that underlies conversations, relationships further explaining the theory's positivist orientation.

Regularity is also discussed in how cognition plays an important role in predicting future actions as assumed in the theory which is a psychological basis grounding social cybernetics as scientific theory as discussed by Pavitt (2010). This is explained in cognitive processing of feedback control where an individual indulges in memory orientation of a past experience that serves as guide to control response.

In terms of functional explanation, social cybernetics renders its goal in social tracking of behavior among participants for improved learning outcomes through mutually compliant feedback mechanisms. Following assumptions of "good-consequences doctrine" (Achinstein, 1983), social cybernetics in face-to-face mode (X) is related to social cybernetics in online learning communities (Y) in terms of their functional end for optimal learning among students. However, asynchronous learning does not align improved learning outcome with classroom setting with the following reasons: individual differences, lack of viable feedback, spatial and temporal displacements, such reasons run contrary to "good-consequence doctrine" assumptions. Theoretically, though, if social cybernetics theory results in positive learning outcomes as applied in classroom platform, the theory's functional explanation holds true, in response to the 'why' part of its purpose. But, after reading through, that functional perspective is not serving its purpose as highlighted in the foregoing reasons. The positivist notion of scientific communication theory is not met in this regard because of the lack of empirical findings to support online learning outcomes consistent with those in classroom setting.

Nevertheless, empirical findings of social cybernetics in general terms highlights similarity between individual and group studies as mentioned. The generality of functional understanding is characterized in synchronous, personal social tracking mechanism that intends to decipher behavioral and interactive patterns of social targets which will determine interaction between people. The same process of interactive outcome serves as input for further cognitive processing and control of interactions in a continuum. In effect, the totality of functional relationship is geared towards a social interlock of harmonious relationship (Smith, 2006). This articulates social cybernetics as a goal-driven theory that uses orientation-stimulus-process-response (OSPR) model emanating from an individual who predicts future interactive behavior with some form of orientation of past experience that forms part of predictive behavioral interaction. The interlock mechanism that exemplifies social fit represents a characteristic of the theory as consistency-driven, meaning to say, social cybernetics targets a balance of interactive tracking mechanisms that result in consistent flow of mutual understanding between social targets through interactive process of feedback loops controlled by individuals in a circular fashion.

Likewise, input-process-output (IPO) in the theory is evident in closed loop framework that characterizes feedbacks being controlled for investigating behavior in social interaction. However, as accentuated in feedback perturbations such as delay, multiplicity of interacting people as in the case of intra-group, inter-group relationships, feedback loops tend to diminish their effectivity. The magnitude of such perturbations is nowhere explained clearly when the theory applies to asynchronous learning. For instance, even for smaller group, say two individuals communicating via video, IPO model will have inherent difficulty in deciphering nuances of behavior and interaction between people as anything can happen on the other side of the channel without being noticed by the other person as opposed to personal communication. The challenge of technological mediation raises issues such as poor images resolution and surrounding noise that can eventually lead to ineffective social

tracking. Added to such difficulty is the staggering cost of video conferencing, for instance, as a method of online teaching that dampens further strengthening of interface learning. With the preponderance of digital learning in our midst, improvement upon OSPR and IPO models will make way for more effective social tracking.

The greatest question this theory asks is whether it is scientific or not. As such, a practical issue of its interactive or communicative aspects is worth pondering. As implied in the definition of social cybernetics, the theory paves the way for fruitful interaction among participants when social tracking is maintained even if the issue of how interactive communication is truthfully achieved remains blurry considering human nature as intrinsically unpredictable in some ways.

Nevertheless, as Pavitt explains, communicative or interactive aspect should be present in communication theory to make it scientific, and social cybernetics possesses interactive aspects largely which qualify it as scientific theory. In defending interaction as a quality in asynchronous learning the article deems to target, it makes sense that interaction should also include communication among online learners, verbal or non-verbal so that the goal-oriented theoretical assumption of positive learning outcome is realized. For instance, controls set forth by individuals as they engage in OSPR model determine how they can predict their future actions (communicative or interactive) using some memory orientation, likewise the other party will respond based on feedback controls. Though this explanation is not explicitly stated in the article, it is construed to be an implied communicative interaction as online learners do really have to communicate throughout the learning process. If the analysis is based on classroom learning only, the notion of communication in the theory is more pronounced as interaction between teacher and students, or among students, relates to communication for the most part. Social tracking in face-to-face learning involves communicative and interactive aspects of students engaged in discussions.

Finally, communicative aspect can easily be deciphered illustrating different social tracking modes that highlight various interactive possibilities, clearly articulating communication, otherwise, they don't mean anything. The foregoing arguments attest to the consequentiality of communication, not as a generative mechanism. This simply means that communication is not inherent, generally viewed as a governing principle in social cybernetics but rather as a consequence, or a result, among other choice of actions. It must also be noted that such movement tracking process is in itself message production sent or communicated to another person or group of persons in the same way that they reciprocate the process with their own interpretation using OSPR model. Mutually compliant process that leads to integration of social behavior (Smith, 2006) can be a tedious process with semiotic differences among social targets resulting in conflict between persons through misreading. This is one theoretical question that should be considered. Moreover, the degree of social dislocation escalates in inter-group and intra-group modes that involve more people interpreting various signals. Having said, the theory needs to be extended to include some standard in message construction that is socially compliant. More specifically, controls set forth through feedbacks should consider consequences of responses.

In another instance, closed loop system in social tracking can also lead to oscillatory response among persons in both ends of the loop. This result renders both positive and negative circumstances. On the positive side, repetitive responses illustrate regularity of information flow that in effect can be anticipated. Related to the idea of projective control principle discussed earlier, feedforwarding may likewise consider familiar responses that have been fed in to the feedback loop leading to an integrated system of harmonious relationship of some sort. In one of the social tracking modes discussed by Smith, imitative mode, it can rightfully exhibit mimicry of responses that multiply presenting a regular pattern of stability. This, once again, accentuates positivist notion of science embedded in social cybernetics. On the negative side, oscillatory responses can be misconstrued as non-responsive reply especially if human processing elicits variability that should render response change and is not understood well by the person. Such insensitivity of response change from a person or a group of persons may lead to social conflict if not remedied, thus, mutual compliance is sacrificed in such situation.

Solving the problem of non-responsive factor in oscillation must be addressed by any of the person or persons engaged in social tracking. One of the strategies useful would be an evaluation of cognitive structure that resides in OSPR, specifically orientation, which upon recognition of its relevance to external stimulus from another person, can be altered before a response is made. Again, this calls for motor control of cognition and learning, clearly articulated by Smith in the article. In view of all positive and negative scenarios that can emanate in social tracking, it must be realized that cybernetics is underpinned by General Systems Theory that recognizes interrelatedness of components reacting in non-linear fashion. In addition, interrelatedness also explains self-regulatory mechanism inherent in systems. Using this analogy in social tracking, social equilibrium can be achieved in mutually compliant feedbacks that have desirable social consequences. Bifurcations as disturbances transform systems functions due to self-regulation and interaction with the environment. In other words, social tracking processes have a tendency to produce optimal result when control of feedback is well-regulated among participants. Furthermore, control is being done by the person not technology, in this case, so it requires sensitivity and careful recognition of feedbacks so that appropriate responses are made.

To strengthen communication's presence in social cybernetics theory, a study was conducted by Smith (2015) which quotes: "social cybernetics theory offers a compelling explanation for why remote conversation on a cell-phone comprises driving performance to a greater degree than in-vehicle conversation." Furthermore, "social cybernetics assumes that each individual in a social context must control the sensory feedback generated not only by his/her own behavioral movements and functioning, but also that created by interacting with one or more social targets (Smith et al., 1995; Smith and Smith, 1987). The relevance of the foregoing statements is the presence of interaction and communication in the theory's application which assertively makes it a scientific communication theory (Pavitt, 2010).

In view of the general systems theory that underpins social cybernetics, it is fitting to explain that the latter embodies systematic observation as another positivist orientation in scientific inquiry. Clearly the article shows careful planning and organization of its research evidently expressed in empirical studies conducted on social tracking where Smith argues that social tracking is not an inherent biological factor but is based on interface designs combined with their human influence, among many other reasons cited that are based on planning designs drawn from factual data.

Related to this human-system relationship in closed loop system is a study conducted on computer-human interaction where following the same analysis of feedback control emanating between two persons in social tracking, a computer can attribute the same function as that of a person such as being systematic, controlled and careful in analyzing feedbacks from its human target to prevent error escalation in space workstation (Smith, 2018). The example illustrates the importance of systematic process of scientific inquiry in social cybernetics that it intends to translate social tracking between humans to machine-human interactive process. Doing such audacious move begins with organized thinking of the possibility of its practicability then it proceeds with gathering data including previous findings, from their employ methodologies to proceed with scientific inquiry. Although the article on space workstations emphasizing computer-human interaction is far from actually happening due to technological impediments, such scientific hypothesis can claim validity of social tracking if proven correctly based on objective findings. This, among other reasons, articulates social cybernetics in the realm of science because of its openness to future research possibilities, a quality of positivist orientation that relies on experiential evidence.

In another discussion on systems, related to the idea of general system that has some application to social tracking is the concept of 'detached observer' that means an observer outside of a system is an essential part of the system in the mind of a person within a system. According to Krippendorff (1984), observed systems are always understood from the outside by a detached observer, the system referred to includes him as an essential part. Using this analogy, social tracking that involves two persons, one receiving messages from another means that one is being observed literally that will provide feedback for interaction and communication as explained in the closed loop system. In other words, the observed person becomes part of the system with which the original individual situates himself with, the reason being that the other entity is not just an outsider but is part of the cycle of feedback mechanism. The same analysis holds true for other modes of social tracking – intra-group, intergroup, etc., where observers essentially take part of the system's flow of interactions. The aforementioned perspective of participant observation characterizes cybernetics of cybernetics or second-order cybernetics (Foster, 1975 & Mead, 1968) that is typical in circular flow of feedback mechanism present in social tracking. A worthy criticism of this second-order cybernetics with the observer as an integral part of the system in feedback loops can be raised in terms of objectivity of scientific observation where a researcher is generally considered an outside observer of the system. Now, with inside participation of an observer within a system of sensory feedback mechanism, does it render unscientific procedure? Although initially there is some veracity in this claim, it must be realized that such observer forms part of an interrelated component that defines a system and system which is undoubtedly a scientific phenomenon.

Studies on interrelationship of components within a system with machine-human versus human-human interactive conversation have been conducted using social tracking as framework. For instance, Smith & Yang (2015) assert that interaction between a driver and someone else on a cellphone is distractive than in-vehicle conversations. Using social cybernetics, this study reveals that talking on mobile phones while driving can result in increased risk of crashes (AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, 2008). Relevant to this research indicates the use of social cybernetics in actual conversation of people apart from non-verbal cues in social tracking process. However, these findings run contrary to suggestions of the space workstations article that call for computer-human interaction similar to feedback mechanisms between people (Smith, 2018).

Aside from the theory's application in practical driving, social tracking can be enhanced in learning using Information Communication Technology (ICT) that involves massive use of technological tools such as DVDs, internet proliferating in today's highly digitized education. Also, the presence of Learning Management System (LMS) that encapsulates all aspects of learning including organizational structure, admission, student support, etc. have the capacity to implement effective social tracking mechanisms which can be considered as bright prospects for deeper understanding of computer-human interactive and communicative social tracking.

Going back to the positivist orientation of social cybernetics, apart from the hallmarks of science previously mentioned that attest to the theory's scientific orientation, the idea of parsimony that engulfs much of the theoretical discussions in the paper confirms its parsimonious presentation of ideas that are characteristically simple, direct and logical. For instance, the article begins with a brief description of social cybernetics with assumptions, generality of meaning in terms of its social tracking practice as a human activity embedded in ordinary interactive practice, and recognition of many applicative modes in social interaction including one to many, inter-group, intra-group, imitative modes, etc., and comparison of its application in face-to-face classroom setting against online learning community where differences are highlighted such as variability factors in online learning that result in the theory's almost non-existent use as pointed out by Smith - all written in simple language that can be understood by a layperson, imbued with an overarching phenomenon of social tracking as a practical human practice. Discussion then proceeds with some empirical findings of social tracking and learning from positive to negative instances that deepen understanding of the theory's applications. The paper concludes with some critical comments on the theory's application in autonomous learning environment which can be a future research possibility.

Finally, scientific characteristic is present in the article's hypothetical assumption of social cybernetics in autonomous setting. To quote, "this report therefore advocates social cybernetic strategies that achieve collaborative learning during student interaction with OLC interfaces." Developing hypothesis that tests validity of theoretical assumption or research practice is a hallmark of scientific method. In view of the article under study, hypothesis is evidentially stated even in the title itself, "Social cybernetic strategies for asynchronous learning."

## Conclusion

Social Cybernetics Theory encompasses qualities of scientific theory. With social tracking as its conceptual framework, the theory suggests that individuals use feedback controls through sensory mechanisms by using orientation-stimulus-process-response (OSPR) in tracking partner's movements and conversations following a feedback loop. The scientific characteristics of social cybernetics were argued for its robust explanation, embodiment of models and functional relationship, parsimony, openness, hypothetical statements, among other characteristics discussed.

Application of the theory in synchronous situations is perceived as ordinary practice of communication and interaction with face-to-face people engaging in feedback controls with their social targets. The problem arises in asynchronous learning where behavioral communication is mediated by technology resulting from problem with context specificity, lack of tactile feedback mechanisms between machine and human as further illustrated in space workstation citation which deems computer-human interaction as relevant so that errors are minimized, and in the case of conversations using cellphone that distracts a driver compared to in-vehicle conversations that entail effective social tracking with both driver and passenger cognizant of surrounding situations such as traffic thereby eliciting feedback controls more effectively.

In view of human-human and machine-human feedback mechanisms explained, the author of this article asks some challenging ways as to how humans satisfy meaningful tracking that is socially acceptable. Human nature is not a fixed set of assumptions that will have direct answers in a given causal relationship. Harder it may seem in ordinary circumstances, it is indeed, even more difficult in online interactions when conversation is mediated by technology. Just as how this article implied social cybernetics to be difficult in asynchronous application, it presents the same question of social equilibrium in mediated interaction. However, with the preponderance of online learning platforms, social tracking should evolve as a common practice with developments in Learning Management Systems (LMS) being done.

Going back to communication theory, it is very important that tensions and agreements within the theory's assumptions are recognizable factors that signal future explorations by communication researchers. The epistemological assumptions the theory provides, its nature as communication practice among social tracking individuals defines its constitutive nature as reflexive (Craig, 1999).

Based on the eight traditions of communication theory (Craig, 1999), social cybernetics is similar to rhetorical tradition in a person's transmission of discourse that can emanate in interactive communication, its dissimilarity accented in a two-way process of feedback mechanism that rhetorical tradition does not have. From phenomenology, social cybernetics exemplifies dialogic process between two or more persons with social tracking as a form of connected impulse in social relationship, its dissimilarity rests on social cybernetics' focus on a person's orientation of past memory in controlling response while phenomenology emphasizes the presence of otherness in present experience. From semiotics tradition, social cybernetics exhibits a form of intersubjective reading of a social target's interaction that also orients past experience of the observer, its dissimilarity rests on response mechanism that emanates social target's interaction or movement apart from internal meaning. From sociopsychological tradition, social cybernetics highlights social tracking as a confluence of expression, interaction and influence between persons in some causality, its dissimilarity exemplified in social cybernetics tendency to be distant from the influence of other people following OSPR analysis utilizing cognitive intervention of past memory. From sociocultural tradition, clearly social cybernetics expresses a human indulgence called social tracking as a reproduction of shared social order, likewise, it is similar to pragmatist tradition in terms of the theory's reflexive character as common, mundane human activity. Social cybernetics differentiates from sociocultural tradition when social tracking reaches social disequilibrium. For pragmatist tradition, social cybernetics is different due to its nonconformity to practical communication when responses are not mutually compliant. From critical tradition, social cybernetics views intersubjective readings as a critical reflective process when a person analyses interaction and behavior of his/her counterpart which characterizes discursive character of critical communication theory. Social cybernetics differentiates from critical tradition as the former considers mutual interaction between persons in feedback mechanism while the latter tends to be aggressive in the interactive process. Finally, social cybernetics clearly illustrates cybernetics tradition with elements of control of feedback mechanism that are clearly illustrated in the tradition's information processing.

Social cybernetics, like many other theories, is not final as it is. Critical comments have been argued especially in technologically mediated circumstances. The audacity of computer-human interaction accentuates that the theory does not simply rely on behavioral and interactive assumptions but it encompasses other fields of inquiry, for instance, informatics and coding procedures that can decipher depths of computer feedback controls. These things require in-depth understanding of science. It goes beyond surface social tracking as its main attribute. The question of how it conducts social tracking is a matter of serious concern for the theory to be more indulgently scientific. For example, social tracking can be explained more with ample diagrams as applied in each of the different modes. Different scenarios that yield social interlock or disequilibrium in feedback responses can be a focus of future studies. Then again it is not to be forgotten that human feedback controls are defined by individual traits, characteristics and attitudes that yield response variability. Deciphering sensory feedback in machines the way human being conducts will be more challenging for a scientific research that will further enrich social cybernetics as science.

As a reflection on Pavitt's article on alternative approaches to theorizing in communication science, communication theory draws from ordinary practice, from something that is common to human practice then abstraction is sought that creates a thread of general understanding of common principles within the practice creating isomorphism. In other words, communication theory is attached to human experience as articulated in many functions it addresses: from hedonism that characterizes human pleasure and pain explained in social tracking's social interlock as a satisfying outcome against a cycle of machine-human interaction that is inherently problematic, hence, unpleasant; as a goal-driven theory that drives purpose and function of social cybernetics justifying social equilibrium; as a consistency-driven theory that implores regularity of communication practice of social tracking in its sensory feedback control mechanisms.

Moreover, communication takes on different meanings from different perspectives which ought to be recognized for their importance. From a business perspective, communication is the flow of information from one person to another (Axley, 1984). Deetz (1994) views it as simply one activity among many others, such as planning, controlling, and managing done in organizations. Communication scholars define communication as the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning (Conrad & Poole, 1998), among many other definitions of the concept. What these definitions tell us is that the nature of communication is perceived and practiced according to its contextual application whether as common practice or something intellectual which states that communication theory is drawn from experience, a distinct characteristic of positivist orientation of social cybernetics in its social tracking application.

With so many examples cited by Pavitt among different constitutive elements of scientific theory, the author of this article sought to explore relatedness of various theories within cybernetics praxis. Even if Craig (1999) recognizes fragmentation of communication theories due to their various applications in different fields, it makes sense that communication is paramount in those respective fields. The problem of unifying communication theories is not a problem at all but as he puts it, it is dialogical-dialectical coherence that articulates tensions and agreements among theories that make the field pompous.

It is the author's argument that communication theory should not be strictly communicative in the sense of its verbal communication only but it should extend to non-verbal communication as well, from behavioral aspects of communication like how animals and plants communicate. Pavitt's article fails to articulate communication in its totality as a human expression that includes both verbal and non-verbal aspects but only emphasizes communication and interaction as elements of its scientific qualities generally implied as verbal communication. Likewise, it needs thorough inclusion of communication theory with different fields to make it more encompassing. Isomorphism as a distinct quality of general systems clearly represents communication practice because in all disciplines communication is a general principle, it binds all theories by way of communication. Therefore, the author of this paper criticizes fragmentation as a problem because communication unites all communication theories. It is a distinct assertion of communication theory's identity that explains human experience as a communication practice. In this fragmented form, dialogical-dialectical coherence defines its place in human experience.

Finally, with all the talk about communication, it is the intent of the author of this article to assert that the Philippines should develop a communication theory that embodies national consciousness. "Pambasang Komunikasyon" that asserts national identity and expresses sentiment of ordinary people is a relevant contribution to the field of communication theory. Stories and testaments of every Filipino in everyday experience of communication can be collected and abstracted to theoretical form because these communicative narratives are attached to everyday life. In relation to social tracking, studies that link mobile communication as it affects relationships among adulterous couples in the Philippines, for instance, can be an area of consideration. Machine-human interaction as mediated by mobile technology hypothetically affects emotional attachment through messages exchanged between parties. With feedback loops as framework, tracking adultery can be deciphered as a scientific inquiry.

Going back to the issue of nationalist communication theory, our local communication experts must develop a theory that more than being scientific, it shapes consciousness, a community of consciousness situated in common practice among ordinary Filipinos. What kind of theory would that be? From today's distinct social media presence, communication is pervasive, instantaneous and an active participant in social issues including widespread fake news that manipulate social consciousness. With such presence especially on fake news, social tracking can be used as potent tool to further scrutinize veracity or "fakeness" of news not only in terms of information received but in terms of synchronous and asynchronous interactions taking place between people. In this sense, social cybernetics extends beyond normal sensory feedback loop achieving social harmony to a critical stance that should help transform Philippine society. In conclusion, it is only fitting to mention Dr. Alexander Flor's statement: "communication is a critical function of all living things. A critical function which leads us to grow... to evolve from current state to a perfect state." This perfect state, for the author of this paper, is the attainment of a national communication theory that identifies and represents sentiments of every Filipino.

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