

1980 SCA Presidential Address

"COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: THE UNCERTAIN 80's"

Malcolm O. Sillars

Alvin Toffler whose book *Future Shock* inspired the theme for this convention is not noted for his reflective and cautious analysis of change. He is a futurist who is fond of sweeping generalizations about whole periods of human history. While he is provocative, he plays looser with the data than many would like. Yet futurism is always an interesting pastime. So for a few moments I would like to look at our field and wonder if it might be undergoing some dramatic change. Exciting things are going on in communication research. They may not meet Toffler's idea of a *Third Wave*. But they do constitute significant change. And at the entry to periods of significant change the most important characteristic is uncertainty. I believe that is where we are in communication research, "the uncertain 80's."

Part of our uncertainty about our research future is a product of our own self-effacing tendencies to question its usefulness. This is not a new problem in our profession. When our Association was organized in 1914 its 17 founders recognized the need for research and they also realized that many members of our field questioned it. We were then, as we are now, an applied field. But our founders knew then as we should know now, that our teaching could not proceed by common sense rules alone. The first issue of our journal in 1915 contained a report of the Research Committee and an article by James A. Winans on "The Need for Research." I commend them both to you as interesting reading. They are amazingly current.

James Winans countered the argument you too frequently hear today, that our job is to teach, research is a waste of time, our journals are dull, their findings useless. Winans said:

"Is it not true that as a class we trust too much to limited observations, theorize too quickly from limited data? Finding that a certain method helps in some cases, do we not too often jump to the conclusion that it embodies a great principle? . . . In every field common-sense resists the investigator: for common-sense is a stand-patter."¹

Like Winans I am disturbed by our contemporary devotees of common sense who prefer to revel in personal observations and limited study and reject the implications of new ideas and research. Our great colleagues have never had this attitude. In the latter years of his life, long after retirement, Charlane and I visited A. Craig Baird and he asked me "Malcolm, what is this interpersonal communication that everyone is writing about in our journals?" He was eager to learn. And no more than a month before Karl Wallace died, when he knew he was dying, he urged me to read a book he had read on the latest physiological research on the nature of the brain. As I consider the possibility of going to that great department meeting in the sky I hope that I can spend the rest of my days before that time with the respect for research which Baird and Wallace had. The case for research has been made over and over again since 1915 and it is time to put our own questions aside as a source of our uncertainty.

In some ways the very success of our research is a second cause for uncertainty. We have come a long way in probing new areas of communication with new research methods. We are no longer just interested in persuasion and aesthetic pleasure. We have added the special problems of media,

developed large areas of interpersonal and group communication, broadened our understanding of history and criticism. We show a concern for scientific laws, rules and patterns. We see linear relationships, and we define systems. We question whether substance, or value, or interaction define what the communication practice is.

As I indicated before, my knowledge of history makes me suspicious of those who see particular periods as crucial. We have just come through the rhetorical orgy of a presidential campaign and must all be weary of hearing that what we decide today, unlike yesterday or a week from tomorrow will determine our lives for years to come. Every period has its crises and is related to every other. So, as I comment on where we are now I do not wish to be misunderstood. We are not moving this year "Beyond Future Shock" to some new *Third Wave*. But if we freeze the process and look for its momentary *stasis*, what I see is a bit more unclear, but the most exciting reason for calling this the "Uncertain 80's."

We can ignore those who reject research. We can take pride in our diversity of research. Those two factors do not change things as radically as does the current breakdown of some of our cherished assumptions.

Clifford Geertz has called it "Blurred Genres." He says, "what we are seeing is not just another redrawing of the cultural map—the moving of a few disputed borders, the marking of some more picturesque mountain lakes—but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think."²

Geertz is referring to the demise of the view of social scientists that they are "underdeveloped natural sciences, awaiting only time and aid from more advanced quarters to harden them."³ It also means, hopefully, that humanists can divest themselves of

the notion that they are the sole guardians of culture in some intuitive and, precious way.

It wasn't too many years ago when some of our leaders were involved in what they regarded as a life and death struggle between truth and error. The empiricists vs the intuitivists, the communicationists vs the rhetoricians, the scientists vs the humanists. Today we respond better to Gerry Miller's notion that what methods you choose are related to what kind of question you want to ask.⁴ And the most valuable answer is not determined by preconceived criteria but by how good an argument can be made for it before a community of scholars.

Although well thought out questions and carefully planned research methods are better than their opposite cousins there are no grounds for asserting the inherent superiority of one kind of question or method over another. Carefulness and usefulness are the only criteria for evaluating research. Those principles hold whether one is interpreting poetic meaning, looking for rules of interpersonal interaction, assessing persuasive impact or observing visual meaning in the mass media.

I believe that all except a few true believers have recognized this point. All research strategies serve, which are careful and useful in addressing appropriate questions. But the concept of blurred genres is more than a matter of mutual respect for the good work of those who are different from us. It implies a more radical departure for the decade ahead. Our researchers, schooled in historical-critical approaches are turning to methods most usually associated with their more empirically oriented colleagues. I refer here to such items as Bruce Gronbeck's study of genres in the documentary, Jim Chesebro's study of values in popular television, Thomas Clark's study of sermons, or Rod Hart's examination of Richard Nixon.⁵

And some researchers who draw more from the empirical tradition are sometimes found talking about games, culture and drama. Many are looking at single cases from which one may gain insights but not rules or laws. The growing interest in interaction analysis, discourse analysis and communication as a key to organizational culture certainly points to a possible time when we will use such a variety of methods that our old distinction will seem humorous at best.

The roots of this variety has been with us all along. The founders of our Association were humanists at base but many years before they did neo-Aristotelian rhetorical analyses they were publishing articles by people like C. H. Woolbert who attempted to develop theory from empirical observations. When experimental research really came into its own after World War II the questions researched reflected the classical, rhetorical categories of evidence, ethos, reasoning and the like. *continued*

Sillars, cont. from page 5

The scholars interested in experimentation branched out, looking at questions which drew their orientations from other fields. Most notably among these was the experimentation in interpersonal and small group communication. Experimental research developed and continued more sophisticated experimentation in persuasion. New ideas from other humanistic disciplines, such as the writings of Kenneth Burke have influenced both historical and critical studies, and the social sciences.

There is no sign that this fruitful interaction will lessen in the future and someday, perhaps in this decade, we may recognize that the genres of our research are not only blurred but reformed. The interaction may be such that we will be looking at different things.

The genres we found so comfortable for the past twenty years are breaking down and what new ones will be formed will probably be disquieting to many of us. When we see our comfortable categories questioned we will be hurt. We need not be. What is useful research is always changing. Some of what is seen as useful is only fad. Other items take a more permanent place in our attention.

Older approaches are improved by attack. To be personal for a moment, I didn't like Edwin Black's attack on neo-Aristotelian criticism when it came out in 1965.⁶ For me it had errors of interpretation and conclusion. But it caused me to reexamine my position and, I trust, develop a more defensible position. I now have what one of my students said is a "giant neo-Aristotelian sponge" with which I absorb everything. But whether we call ourselves neo-Aristotelians or scientists, interactionists or transactionists, whether we are interested in hermeneutics, constructivism, symbolic interaction or what have you, the times are changing. The research picture for the eighties is uncertain.

Another quotation from Clifford Geertz is a fitting close to my remarks here:

"At a time when social scientists are chattering about actors, scenes, plots, performances, and personae, and humanists are mumbling about motives, authority, persuasion, exchange, and hierarchy, the line between the two, however comforting to the puritan on the one side and the cavalier on the other, seems uncertain indeed."⁷

NOTES

1. James A. Winans, "The Need for Research," *Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking*, 1 (April 1915), 18.
2. Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres," *American Scholar*, (Spring 1980), 166.
3. Geertz, 166.
4. Gerald R. Miller, "Humanistic and Scientific Approaches to Speech Communication Inquiry: Rivalry, Redundancy, or

Rapprochement," *Western Speech Communication Journal*, 39 (Fall 1975), 230-239.

5. Bruce Gronbeck, "Celluloid Rhetoric: On Genres of Documentary," *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, eds. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1978), 139-165. James W. Chesebro, "Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series—A Four Year Assessment," *Television: The Critical View* (second edition) ed. Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford, 1979), 16-54. Thomas D. Clark, "An Exploration of Generic Aspects of Contemporary American Sermons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 63 (December 1977), 384-394. Roderick Hart, "Absolutism and Situation: Prolegomena to a Rhetorical Biography of Richard M. Nixon," *Communication Monographs*, 43 (August 1976), 204-228.

6. Edwin Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Methods*, (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

7. Geertz, 175.

CALL FOR ARTICLES

The Editorial Board for *Religious Communication Today*, publication of the Religious Speech Communication Association, invites submission of articles for the 1981 magazine/journal. The next edition will be the fourth year of publication.

Submission deadline for the 1981 edition is March 15, 1981. All articles are submitted to at least three readers for evaluation. Contents are to be based on thorough scholarship and/or observation, written simply, clearly, and interestingly in non-sexist language. The focus and primary appeal should be the parish worker, lay or professional but should hold some appeal to the academician. The form is to be typed, double spaced, one side of the paper only following Turabian style. Length may vary from 300-5000 words of text exclusive of footnotes but extensive discursive footnotes are discouraged. Most articles used will be 1200-2500 words but shorter and longer articles are welcome.

Please address materials in triplicate to DeWitte Holland, Editor of RCT, Box 10050, Lamar University, Beaumont, TX 77710, as soon as possible but not later than March 15, 1981. A prompt reply may be expected. A stamped self addressed envelope should be included to guarantee return of unused materials.

Memorial Fund

A New Playwrights Fund has been established at the University of Alabama from the estate of Dr. Marian "Doc" Galloway, who died on November 8, 1980. Memorial contributions to the fund should be sent to: Dr. Edmond Williams, Department of Theatre and Dance, P. O. Box 6386, University, AL 35486.

WINANS-WICHELS
AWARD NOMINEES SOUGHT

The James A. Winans-Herbert A. Wichels Memorial Fund was established by students, colleagues, and admirers of those two distinguished Cornell University professors. The Annual Award (currently \$500) supported by the Fund honors distinguished scholarship in rhetoric and public address. The selection committee is named by the Public Address and Rhetorical and Communication Theory Divisions.

Nominations of articles, monographs, or books by SCA members published between 1 July, 1980 and 30 June, 1981 should be sent to the selection committee chairperson:

Michael Osborn
Theatre & Communication Arts
Department
Memphis State University
Memphis, TN 38512

The other members of the selection committee are Bruce Gronbeck, and John H. Patton.

The announcement of the 1981 Winans-Wichels Award will be made at the November, 1981 SCA Annual Meeting in Anaheim. Nominations should be made as soon as possible and prior to September 1.

RSCA STUDENT COMPETITIVE
PAPER AWARD

The Religious Speech Communication Association announces a competitive call for student papers concerned with religious communication. The writer of the winning contribution will receive a \$50 cash award and be asked to present his or her paper at the RSCA meeting held simultaneously with the SCA Convention in Anaheim next November. Papers may be submitted by any fulltime undergraduate or graduate student, and can deal with any aspect of religious communication. They will be judged on the basis of scholarship, significance, and writing. The deadline for submission is June 15, 1981. All papers should be submitted in triplicate to Dr. Del Nykamp, Dept. of Speech, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI 49508. You do not have to be a member of RSCA to submit an entry.

Spectra, a publication of the Speech Communication Association is sent to all members. *Spectra* appears each month, except May and July. Copy deadline is six weeks before the first of the publication month. The deadline for position vacancy listings and other "classified" advertisements is one month before the first of the publication month. Annual subscription rate for nonmembers: \$10.00. Communications should be addressed to the Editor, William Work, Speech Communication Association, 5105 Backlick Road, Annandale, VA 22003.