

1998 NCA Presidential Address**Communication Matters**

Editor's Note: John A. Daly's address was given on November 23, 1998, at the NCA Annual Meeting in New York City.

Twenty-five years ago at this time, I was three months into my Master's program. Early in that November, following the long and hallowed tradition of graduate school, I drove with a carload of fellow students to my first academic convention. The convention was the first, then SCA, conference that was not held at the end of December. Traditionally, as many of you will remember, the conference occurred between Christmas and New Year's Eve. Members, for the first time in many years, could spend the holiday season with their family—their personal family, not their professional one.

The convention was held in New York City, down the street at the Statler Hilton. One quarter century later we are back in New York City. Twenty-five years ago the President of our Association was Robert Jeffery from the University of Texas; today Bob Jeffrey is a colleague of mine at Texas. Twenty-five years ago there were discussions of moving the national office to Washington, D.C.; today there are still discussions of moving it into Washington D.C.

No longer am I a graduate student. I have, it seems, somehow reached the point of being a person who prefers flying to driving to conventions; who celebrates having a room that is not littered with fellow students lying on floors; who enjoys receiving invitations to parties rather than crashing them; and who relishes restaurants of some merit over the quick, cheap, but often less than savory fare of McDonalds.

Our Association has changed as well. In 1973 the membership of the Association was much smaller. The convention program was quite modest. The page count of programs was only 51 pages—half advertisements. Each page was generous in margins. Today, our program is a densely packed 269 pages. In the 1973 program, the index of participants was contained in three and half pages; today it is 29 pages of small type. Many names in the 1973 program are still participating in our conference this week. Young folks like David Zarefsky, Rod Hart, Darrell Piersoll, Bruce Gronbeck, Bill Balthrop, James McCroskey, Judee Heston Burgoon and many, many others. Some others have become legends, passing on to that giant convention in the clouds: Gerry Miller, Carroll Arnold, Ted Clevenger, Gail Sorensen, Dale Leathers, Tom Hurt, to name but a few. Some of the 1973 programs now seem quaint—such as ones on the possibilities of cable television, the use of the open classroom, and projects exploring how mainframe computers might be used in communication scholarship. Of special note was a session for the wives of members attending the convention held by the wives of the officers. Times are different. But there were also many, many papers and programs that could, at least by title, easily fit within this year's conference. So much has changed, and yet so little.

Change is what life is all about. But while much has changed in our discipline, some things stay constant. And those constants are what I want to briefly talk about tonight. I hope to lay out certain

fundamental beliefs of our discipline and note, at the same time, some challenges we will face in the future.

In all of our Association's diversity, what do we all stand for? Jim Gaudino, our Executive Director, relates a wonderful story about his first meeting at the Council of Learned Societies (an

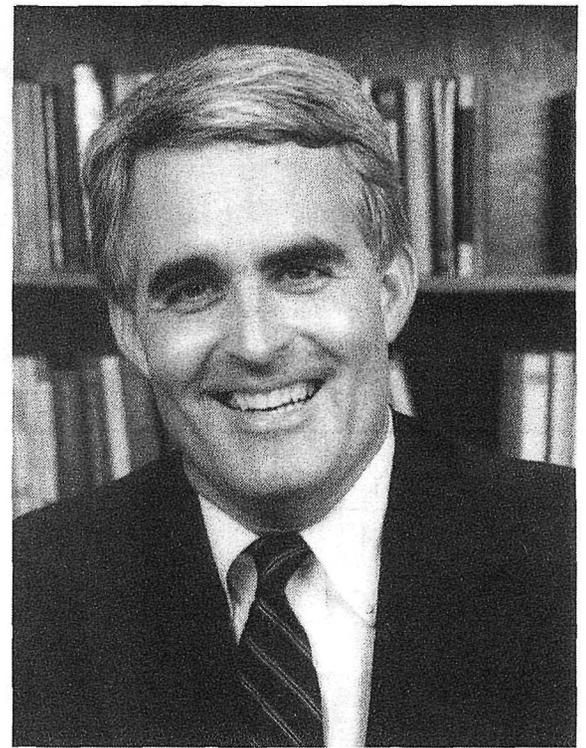
organization that we dreamed of becoming part of twenty-five years ago and just last year joined, thanks to the efforts of James Chesebro and Judith Trent). Gaudino was sitting next to the Executive Director of the American Economics Association. As they chatted, this gentleman revealed the massive diversity of interests among his membership: There were Marxist economists and classical economists, there were feminist economists and traditional Keyenisan economists. After this individual finished describing the potpourri of members, Jim asked him (and I apologize for any license I take when repeating Jim's story) whether their meetings were raucous—whether they had difficulty even meeting together when people had such differences. The economist responded, "No, not at all. You see, when you scratch any of those people, underneath you find an economist."

Well, when you scratch a communication scholar or teacher, what do you find? What do we share in common? What do we all believe? What do we hold sacred? Let me speak for myself tonight naming six beliefs I think we all treasure.

First, we believe that what we study is singularly important. Nothing matters more than communication to our world, to our relationships, to our families, and to our personal and professional careers. Our belief in the importance of communication is buttressed by scholarship. Our research in mass communication, for instance, tells us of the astounding impact media can have on all us. What we see on television, hear on radio, read in newspapers and magazines, and view on computers can shape our views of our society.

Study after study reveals the central role of interaction to our world. It allows us to participate, to achieve, and to prosper. McKinsey, the large international consultancy, has discovered interactions, broadly defined, represent as much as 51% of labor activity in the United States—the equivalent of more than one third of our gross domestic product. Economist Deidre McCloskey has long argued that our economy is essentially a communicative economy.

More grounded in everyday experience are the plethora of studies that demonstrate, in every work setting, the palpable importance of communication. I challenge you to find a single



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study of the most important skills of any job where communication is not seen as primary.

The same is so in our most intimate of relationships. Talk counts. What we say, and how we say it, matters. All of us learned long ago that while sticks and stones may break our bones, words can hurt far, far more. What we study and teach is central to the lives of every person in the world. Indeed, communication creates the world in which we live.

Too often, I overhear someone in our discipline imply we are second-class citizens in the academy. "Why didn't I become a historian, psychologist, or literary scholar," they wonder. To them I say, "shame!" Stand tall and be proud of what you do. It is so very, very important. We should, and I hope each of us does, wake up every morning knowing that what we study and teach is vital.

Second, given its centrality, we believe that it is essential to deeply understand the phenomena of communication. We trust that our scholarship, done with diligence and loving care, will permit us to better grasp this most complex of human undertakings. And look at what we have accomplished.

It sounds a bit extreme to say this, but we know more, and understand more, about communication today than anytime in the past. We have produced, in the 84 years of our organization, thousands and thousands of studies that have advanced the world's understanding of communication. While many complain about the proliferation of our publications, all of us can agree that all the work that has gone into so many research forays has indeed yielded a bountiful harvest of discoveries. Just look at some of the things we can confidently explain to others less schooled in the study of communication.

- We understand the etiology of, and techniques for, reducing that most common of maladies—stage fright. Our research can make people more comfortable when challenged by a speech.
- We understand how persuasion, in public and personal domains, operates. We can recommend successful strategies for public health campaigns; we can tell health care providers how they can influence their patients' willingness to take important, life-saving medicines. The things we study help people live.
- We tell teachers about ways they can more effectively present their lessons so students leave their classrooms knowing more than they did when they entered. The studies we conduct can better the lives of children.
- We know ways of sanely coping with conflict. We actually teach couples how to fight in ways that can enhance the quality of their relationships. Our research can make people happier with each other.
- We can teach people how to carefully consider arguments made in debates and advertisements. We can challenge unethical manipulations of people's attitudes.
- We grasp nuances of language used in even the most mundane of conversations. We now know how language is used to empower some and disenfranchise others.
- We are able to advise people on how to make more effective use of various media to affect changes in society. We can also caution parents and policy-makers of the dangers of media.
- We have deep understandings of how culture affects

communication and how communication, simultaneously, shapes cultures. We can offer sharp critical analyses that enhance our grasp of cultural values.

- We can tell students how to speak in ways that make their oral delivery interesting, entertaining, and even intriguing.

This list could go on for a long time. We can make these statements because we have strong and compelling evidence to support them.

Underlying most of these items are careful, well crafted theoretic analyses that have yielded enormously valuable insights. Indeed, the conceptual underpinnings of our field have become so strong that scholars in sister disciplines of English, political science, psychology, business, and history, to name but a few, use our work. Our best scholarship now is published by the most intellectually demanding of houses—Cambridge, Oxford, Chicago, Princeton, and others. Our research-oriented faculty members are regularly quoted in every media on issues of critical importance to the nation. We've made it to the "majors."

Intellectually, we browse our colleges and universities seeking insights from any discipline that might help us further understand what we study. We are not ashamed of our inherent interdisciplinarity. Instead, we revel in it. We know that the best ideas come not from rigid disciplinary or ideological grounds but from a wonderful synergy that derives from politely grazing on everyone's turf.

Yet at the same time we cannot forget that we have a unique perspective and a unique body of knowledge. There are certain things we study and certain things we do that others don't. Furthermore, we understand and do many of those things better than any one else. We can be borrowers but never beggars. It is okay to borrow thoughts, methods, and discoveries from other fields. But we should not view ourselves as beggars, for we have a rich intellectual foundation that offers a great deal to other fields.

The respect we have earned comes from the diligent labors of scholars drawing insights during thousands and thousands of late nights in the office. I worry sometimes that too many people dismiss this labor. They doubt the value of academic inquiry. They complain about how irrelevant many of our studies appear to be. They question whether we should spend the time and money scholarship requires. They ask why we should probe issues that are not "fundable." Some even question whether it is possible to really "know" anything.

But never forget that the coin of the realm in the academic world is scholarship. We have a responsibility to add to the world's understanding of communication—adding by careful thinking, thorough analysis, and a willingness to share that knowledge with others. For without our scholarship we are no better than talk show hosts like Jerry Springer who close each show with what they purport are deep insights into the human condition. Asking good questions and spending the hard time probing them is what we, as academicians, are all about.

A third constant is that we believe there is enormous value in the teaching of communication. We help people become better communicators. We can do this because it is axiomatic to us that people can bolster their communicative effectiveness. Anyone, we believe, can, with study and practice, enhance their skills at communicating. We can teach people how to be better, more effective speakers. We can help them become more astute critics. We can advise people about how to run a better meeting, how to

more sensitively counsel others, how to more sanely handle arguments. We know what students need to do to make better films, produce better mediated technologies, and perform in strikingly impressive ways.

We can do these things because we understand what it takes to be a competent communicator. We give people the power of the word, and nothing is more powerful! Teaching communication today presents many challenges that can be seen as opportunities.

For one, we have been unwilling to closely examine what is core to our teaching. What is it that any educated person ought to know about the discipline? We always talk as if we are a young field, not yet ready to declare basic and core concepts. But we really aren't that young. We've been around long enough that we should be able to agree on our basic claims. Try an experiment. Ask 50 members at this convention what any person receiving a broad degree in communication should know. How much agreement do you think you would get? I worry that the level of agreement would be small. In most other disciplines, this is not typically the case. Art historians know that anyone receiving a degree can recognize the masters; in the sciences, an agreed upon knowledge base is straightforward. In history I dare say any graduate knows certain ages, certain movements, and certain major historical themes. No one graduates from a philosophy program without grasping, at the very least, Plato, basic logic, and common ethical dilemmas. We need to think about why it is we are unwilling, if not unable, to agree on basic presumptions and even basic claims. Our fear of canonization may be driving out the good in search of some ephemeral best.

How we teach will also change. Consider the flurry of attention directed towards new technologies. Certainly technology will change both how and what we teach. But as James O'Donnell so ably demonstrates in his recent book, *Avatars of the World*, most communication technologies don't replace their predecessors. Instead, they add new dimensions and new opportunities. Many feared what movable type would do to conversation, what television would do to radio. But there is still conversation and still radio.

In marketing there is a simple but very important notion—you never fall in love with your product, you fall in love with what your product does for people. Companies, organizations, educational institutions, and even individuals who fail to take this notion seriously suffer grievously for their ignorance. Slide rules faded as the calculator became cheaper and more accessible. Think of that most favorite of academic tools—the typewriter. As one who typed his own dissertation, thankfully in the age of erasable bond paper and photocopying (and thus avoiding carbons), I treasured my typewriter. It was a gold Smith-Corona that cost my parents more than \$400. But, ever fickle, as soon as technology introduced the word processor, I abandoned my typewriter to wherever all the many millions of them have retired. But notice that we still calculate and we still write. The tools have changed, but not the basic objectives. The same principle applies to communication education. There are good and valid discussions of whether our institutions need to take more seriously the question of what business we are in—education and learning or bricks and mortar? New technologies and their progenies—distance education, for one—will change our discipline in both good and bad ways. But no matter what the means of delivery, what we teach will remain important. We will have to adapt. And some of us won't find it comfortable. Yet in the end, it will broaden our appeal and enhance our teaching.

Fourth, we believe that our understanding of communication makes us reasonable critics of communication and the various roles it plays in our societies. Our knowledge brings with it responsibility, for communication not only reflects the world we live in, it creates it. Power is intimately tied to communication. Access to various forums determines one's ability to influence others.

We don't shy away from critiquing the good and bad in communication. We see a place for ethics in what people say and even how they say it. We are willing to take stands—to suggest that some forms of communication are ethically questionable. We are not afraid to critique advertisements that selfishly take advantage of only some information. We challenge structures that limit the free expression of opinions. We believe in the value of good argument—that often the best answer to a question comes from heated, but civilized, discussion. We understand that there are different points of view—none necessarily more correct than others. We believe there are many ways of knowing. We treasure a diversity of approaches, understanding that our strength comes from our delightful heterogeneity. Adaptive species and adaptive societies recognize that homogeneity can be the worst of enemies. Successful adaptivity comes from diversity.

Our critical bent has led us, in recent years, to often critique our own discipline. Every three to four years we hear a medley of voices claiming there is ferment in the field; that we need to reinvent what we are about, that much of what we study and teach is irrelevant. All of that discussion is healthy as long as we don't critique ourselves out of business. We need to remember that people actually listen to, and take seriously, these conversations. A university provost at a leading institution wondered aloud to me one time, that were she to take seriously the many complaints of her faculty in Communication about the state of our field, she would have to question whether we should exist at all.

What I am suggesting is not that we forget our weaknesses, but rather we spend more time celebrating our strengths; that we be more proud of what we study, what we leave behind as legacies. For if we don't respect ourselves, how can we expect others to respect us?

Fifth, we believe that we have a responsibility to use our understanding and skills to better the worlds we live in. I sometimes fear that in our commitment to better understanding the conceptual nuances of communication we forget that we are, as Bob Craig once suggested, an inherently practical field. For those of us who grew up in Departments of Speech or Speech Communication, we should never forget our foundation—to help people do a better job of communicating.

We were founded in part to empower the disenfranchised: to take kids off the farm, teach them to speak as well as those Ivy League rich kids, and give them, consequently, much better chances to compete. That is a wonderful mission we should never forget. We offer hope. Our basic courses matter. Not only because they introduce people to the field, but because, at their best, they teach students a skill that can measurably change their lives. All of our courses can do this. Our students go out and shape the world. They become producers and directors, politicians and lawyers, salespeople and executives. Some assume leadership roles in their communities, most become parents. And what we teach them affects not only their lives, but all the lives they touch.

There are many practical opportunities for us outside the classroom. Our students are beginning to see this in service

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learning where they quickly discover the applicability of the lessons learned in the classroom. Our researchers are initiating community-based activities grounded in the practical use of communication in everyday life. We are beginning to see some of our colleagues become public intellectuals regularly offering advice and counsel to public and private organizations worldwide.

We need to foster these activities for, in our competitive world, the people behind them make our case to our larger publics. We must encourage our colleagues who want to spend time outside of the traditional arena of the academic life. Understand this: If we don't do it, somebody else will. If you buy my premise that we are the experts at communication, who better than us? So, when a faculty member says that she or he wants to consult with a large government agency or serve on a city council, or a graduate student opts for a career in consulting, let's not dismiss them for "selling out." If they make a difference, if their grasp of communication changes the world, let's applaud that effort.

Let me push this a bit further. I sometimes detect a hesitancy among many of us to proffer advice to people about communicating. We don't feel we know enough. We understand the various contingencies so well that we know there is never a simple and unambiguous answer to a question. On the one hand, those worries are correct. But on the other hand, maybe we ought to take more risks. Maybe we should decide that since we know more than anyone else about communication, our advice, as limited as it may be, will probably be better informed than any advice offered by columnists, pundits, and talk show hosts. Doing this requires a different approach to writing and to speaking. You have to drop the phrase "it depends." You have to deal with real life issues as complex as they may be. But the rewards, individually, and for the discipline, will be great.

A sixth, and final, constant is that we believe that what we teach and study is fun. There is joy in communication—in having a great conversation, directing a great performance, producing a well-executed documentary. Our field is fun, in part,

because we have a community—a community of people who I believe care about each other and what they do. We all, in this room, have colleagues: people who value what we work on, what we study, and what we teach. In the years I have served in roles in this Association, I have been continually struck by the willingness of our members to give of their time and their energy to the betterment of this field.

Talking to an arborist years ago I discovered that the sequoia tree—one of the world's tallest trees—has proportionately to its size, amazingly shallow roots. "How does it stand up?" I asked. He told me it was simple: Every tree holds up every other one. The roots are intertwined. One tree couldn't stay up. Many can easily stand the toughest winds. That describes our field. We support each other.

In times when we hear so many people cry out about the problems facing our discipline—the lack of seeming focus, the tensions between interests, the continuing politicization of what some see as scholarly issues—let us not forget that we all share some things in common. Let us

find and hold true to a simple belief. We are the most central of disciplines.

Twenty-five years ago I walked into a large hotel, bigger than most I had ever experienced. I was thrilled to be at my first convention. I had so many expectations. I would meet famous people in the field. I would be able to put faces to names I had read about in journals and textbooks. I would find hundreds of people who shared my excitement about the study of communication.

This week, I walked into this convention with the same sense of excitement. But I also have a different perspective. My excitement today stems, in part, from seeing the eyes of new graduate students just beginning their journey in our discipline. I imagine that in twenty-five years one of them will stand in a room like this. He or she will be giving a presidential address. And underlying everything she or he says will be a straightforward proposition, braced by the six constants I have mentioned tonight—that communication matters.

Thank you!

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