

The Communication Field's Commitment to Socially Engaged Research

Years ago when I was an undergraduate student, as some of you are now, I fell in love with the discipline of communication. What captivated me was that I believed then, **as I do now**, that communication theories and skills have extraordinary potential to make a difference in the quality of our personal and collective lives. Communication affects every aspect of human existence. Given that, it is no surprise that research and teaching in communication have always been and continue to be relevant to every facet of our lives.

The Clasp Conference today allows us to highlight what is unique and important about the discipline of communication. My talk will reinforce the theme of the conference by showing how the communication field has adapted to the ever-changing landscape of our society so that it is continually relevant to our individual and collective lives.

In my talk today, I will briefly sketch the early roots of the field, showing how it arose to address social issues. Then I'll fast forward to the present era and describe some current lines of research that exemplify the communication field's relevance to issues in our lives today.

So, first, a bit of history.

Dating back more than 2,400 years, communication has long been regarded as a cornerstone of civic life. As many of you probably know, communication—then known as rhetoric—was born on the Isle of Syracuse. Citizens of Syracuse wanted to bring claims against

a tyrannical government that had stolen their property. These citizens needed to be effective, persuasive oral advocates for their rights. They needed to know how to persuade courts to return their property to them. And this need was the genesis of formal teaching of rhetoric, or persuasive speaking. In other words, the field came into existence to answer a pressing need in the lives of citizens of Syracuse.

Centuries later, the ancient Greek teacher and scholar, Aristotle, taught his students how to craft persuasive speeches that shaped public life and values in Athens. In Greece, persuasive skill was the key to effective participation in civic affairs. Once again, rhetoric focused on equipping citizens to with the skill to have a voice in the life of their society.

As rhetoric moved into more modern times, it continued to occupy a premier place in liberal education in both Europe and the United States. During the nineteenth century prestigious universities such as Harvard established Chairs of Rhetoric that were held by luminaries including John Quincy Adams, who later became President of the United States.

By the early part of the 20th century, the distinguished pragmatic philosopher John Dewey was on the faculty at the University of Chicago. In his teaching, he championed progressive thinking. His teaching and writing also emphasized communication skills because Dewey realized that progressive thought could have no impact unless citizens were taught the communication skills that allowed them to give voice to progressive ideas.

Dewey's attention to forms of communication such as dialogue and discussion motivated the field to expand beyond its original focus on rhetoric. By the middle of the 20th century, the discipline included discussion, leadership, debate, and interpersonal communication. The civil rights and feminist movements that transformed America in the 1960s and 1970s prompted the

field to expand again to include social movements—the communicative dynamics that they use and the ways in which social movements redefine society.

By the 1990s and continuing to the present, communication research and teaching have increasingly reflected the influence of French philosopher Michel Foucault, who was deeply concerned with power relations in society. Recognizing that power is exercised through communication, Foucault paid close attention to who is and is not allowed to speak. More specifically, he illuminated the ways that culturally entrenched understandings—almost always unwritten and unacknowledged—

- Define who gets to speak and who is silenced
- Define to whom we listen
- And define what we count as important.

Attention to the ways in which some people's communication is allowed and other people's communication is disallowed, devalued, or ignored has become an increasingly important focus in the field.

Let me offer an example. Historically, public participation in decisions affecting the health and environment of their communities has been restricted to privileged citizens—scientists and middle and upper-class citizens. Left out of these vital discussions have been members of working class and citizens with little formal education. Their voices and their concerns are often dismissed because they lack the technical vocabularies of scientists and policy makers. Yet it is their lives that are usually at greatest risk when environmental dangers exist.

Communication scholars have shown that people who are poor, non-white, and not formally educated are often silenced when they try to participate in decisions concerning the health of their communities. Too often they are made voiceless by institutional barriers and administrative practices that define their concerns and their ways of speaking as inappropriate.

This issue has been defined as “environmental justice” or “environmental racism.” The name of the issue arises from the fact that virtually always toxic waste dumps and other environmental hazards are located in communities populated by minority and poor citizens—that is, these citizens are much more likely than middle and upper class citizens to carry the burden of toxic wastes from plants and production processes that provide various desired products and services to all citizens. Communication scholars such as Robert Cox and Phaedra Pezzullo focus on this issue and on changing it. In addition to publishing research, they are using their expertise in communication to work in communities that are disproportionately affected by environmental racism. They help grassroots groups gain a voice in the communication contexts where decisions are made about who bears the burdens of environmental dangers.

Phaedra Pezzullo has documented an interesting use of communication to raise awareness of environmental racism. This is called toxic tourism—when people in a community affected by environmental hazards invite outsiders, including, importantly, legislators and other policy makers, to tour polluted areas—to put their bodies in the midst of toxins. For example, toxic tours have been organized in Brownsville Texas where the toxic poisoning of water is linked to unusual rates of anencephalic births—babies born without a cerebrum or cerebellum. Toxic tours of Brownsville are forcing awareness and accountability in those who have the power to get rid of the toxins. The recent toxic leakage into the water supply in West Virginia is another example, but it will be years before we know whether that caused health problems and, if so, what problems and how serious they are.

Along with growing interest in inequity in the public sphere, today’s communication scholars are studying how communication practices affect our identities and sense of self-worth.

- For instance, Marian Meyers at Georgia State, studies how media portrayals of women, men, and relationships foster the belief that it’s normal for men to abuse

- women in personal relationships.
- Naomi Johnson at Longwood, along with others, investigates how media and other cultural structures encourage women, especially white middle- and upper-class women, to be dangerously thin and to link their self-worth to what they can buy.
 - Brenda Allen at Denver and Lisa Barry here at LaGuardia are among the communication scholars who have demonstrated media's racist practices, showing that media represent minorities in negative, stereotypical ways, which, of course, fuels discrimination in the world beyond media—the so-called real world.
 - Scholars such as Dawn Braithwaite are studying changing family forms. The two straight parent, in-tact nuclear family is no longer the only or even the majority family form in the United States. Communication scholars are at the forefront of giving us insight into new family forms that are part of contemporary life.
 - Dawn and her colleagues coined the term “volunteer kin” to describe people who are not related by blood or marriage and yet consider themselves families. They take care of each other, celebrate holidays together, and do other things that define families.
 - Fern Johnson and Marlene Fine have just published a book about families that include more than one race. These include interracial marriages and also adoptions of children whose races differ from those of the adoptive parents.
 - Kristen Norwood recently published a stunning article on transpeople and their families in which she traced how families adjust to losing a son and gaining a daughter or vice versa as a child goes through sex transition.

Because the field of communication is dynamic, it evolves to reflect and speak to the continuously changing character and needs of our culture.

Communication's Current Engagement with Social Issues

I've already noted a number of examples of current communication research that is relevant to our individual and collective lives. Now I'd like to focus on three lines of research that illustrate communication scholars' attention to issues that touch our everyday lives.

Sexual Harassment

One discouragingly common problem in our society is sexual harassment. Whether on the gauntlet at the Navy's Tailhook convention or armed forces deployed overseas, or in the less spectacular setting of a back room in a small, unheardof company, we know that sexual harassment is pervasive. It is estimated that 30% to 50% of women students are harassed and as many as 75% of women in the workplace experience some form of sexual harassment. Men, too, are sexually harassed, although this is less common.

Communication scholars such as Robin Clair and Debbie Dougherty have identified kinds of communication that sustain an organizational culture that regards sexual harassment as just part of how things are done. **EVEN MORE IMPORTANT**, their work gives us knowledge that can be used to disrupt the idea that sexual harassment is normal, routine, or acceptable.

Some years ago, I edited a symposium in one of our national journals. The symposium allowed individuals to tell their stories of being sexually harassed in their own words and in a space where others would heed their words. After the stories appeared, I received calls from a number of male faculty and graduate students who had read them. Consistently, the men who called told me that reading the stories had given them a clearer understanding of sexual

harassment and of the ways that women might perceive certain behaviors differently than the men making them. I cannot help but believe that these stories of what sexual harassment feels like and does to people reduces the likelihood of engaging in harassment and reduce tolerance for others who commit it.

Since that symposium was published, communication scholars have conducted much research that enhances our understanding of the dynamics of sexual harassment. AND this work gives clear guidance into ways to reduce the incidence of sexual harassment. Corrective measures we have identified include both individual actions to stop sexual harassment and changes in institutional structures so that harassment is less likely to be perpetrated or tolerated.

I can assure you that the research on sexual harassment is not esoteric “ivory tower” theorizing. On occasion, I consult with attorneys who are trying cases that involve charges of sexual harassment. It’s been very gratifying to discover that the research we conduct does apply to real world situations and that it sometimes changes those situations for the better.

Violence Between Intimates

Research in communication has addressed a second serious issue: Violence between intimates, which is alarmingly widespread in our society. Current estimates are that 25% of women in the United States have been violently attacked by husbands or boyfriends and 14% of men have been attacked by wives or girlfriends. Communication scholars have led the way in understanding and intervening in intimate partner violence.

- James West has shown how policies and practices in the public sphere sustain the idea that violence between intimates is normal and acceptable.
- Teresa Sabourin has illuminated ways in which husbands’ and wives’ communication fuels or defuses violence.

- Loreen Olsen, Glen Stamp, and Teresa Sabourin have studied how abusive husbands justify violence with language that blames their victims.
- Brian Spitzberg and Bill Cupach have mapped unwanted aggression among college students. Included in their understanding of violence is stalking, which they report is experienced by 18-21% of college students.
- Kate Harris is currently studying women who have unwanted and non-consensual sex with friends or dates. Her work shows that many women do not use the word “rape” to refer to nonconsensual sex with friends or dates even though the experience meets the legal definition of rape. Through in-depth interviews with women who have had this experience, Kate has learned that many women are uncomfortable with the current rhetorical framing of rape as any unwanted sex. It may be that some women find the category too broad—that they feel it includes very disparate acts from brutal stranger rape to unwanted sex with a partner.

Some of my own research has focused on violent romantic relationships. Several years ago I completed a study of women who had been in violent romantic relationships. Their stories reveal that broad social narratives of gender and romance shape women’s understandings of what happens in their own relationships. The gender and romance narratives provided by our culture tell us that love conquers all and good women stand by their men. These cultural narratives encourage many women to justify and accept violence inflicted on them.

To follow up that study, I interviewed male inmates who had committed violence against girlfriends and wives. Talking with these men allowed me to understand how they perceived their violence against women. Most of the men that I interviewed didn’t see themselves as violent and saw specific acts of violence as appropriate if they perceived a woman disrespected them,

did something they didn't like, or didn't do something they wanted. After these studies, I worked with educational and psychological staff at the prison to develop a program that helps men recognize violence in themselves, name it as that, and then identify and enact options to violence when they are angry, frustrated, or otherwise distressed.

I titled my article on men who committed intimate partner violence *Monsters and Victims* because, in the process of doing this research, I learned, as I had expected, that the men I interviewed were monsters, who had viciously assaulted, even killed wives and girlfriends. But I also learned something I hadn't expected—these men were also victims:

- Victims of social hierarchies that kept them on the lowest rungs with meager opportunities and rewards;

AND

- Victims of cultural codes of masculinity that many of them subscribed and felt they couldn't meet.

Violence between intimates will remain a focus of communication research as long as it remains a problem in our society.

Mapping Social Media's Presence in Our Lives

Let me turn now to a third focus of much current communication research: social media and—more broadly—technologies of communication that are reshaping our lives at lightning speed. Scholars and teachers of communication are at the forefront of exploring the ways in which social media affect, for good or ill, our identities, relationships, work, and civil society. Consider just a few examples of communication research that relates to social media.

Identity Work

Personal identity is a central issue for humans. We are continuously forming, questioning, changing, performing, and protecting our identities. This has always been the case, but social media have provided a major new platform for identity work. A former doctoral student of mine, Katy Bodey, and I studied how young women use social media, and we discovered that they are doing some critical identity work.

For instance, many young girls create blogs and write regularly in ways that question expectations others impose on them and that try out a range of ways of resisting those expectations. Reading their blogs and visiting their social networking sites, Katy and I quickly realized that these girls use social media to negotiate and sometimes to resist various pressures—pressure to be thin, to be sexy, to be sexual, to dress in particular ways, to have boyfriends. Equally, they use social media to construct identities that, in many cases, defy conventional expectations of femininity. We also saw these young women being supported by peers. Their engagement with social media is a 21st century version of consciousness-raising groups.

After reading their online postings, we concluded that many young women use innovative or non-traditional methods to find and use their voices.

Cyberbullying

A second focus of communication research on social media is cyberbullying. Social networks can be—and too often are—used for cyberbullying, which includes text messages, comments, rumors, embarrassing pictures, videos, and fake profiles that are meant to hurt another person and are sent by email, tweeted, or posted on social networking sites. Tweets such as “Jeanie is a slut” or “Angie is fat” are very hurtful, regardless of whether they are true. According to a recent report, 43% of teenagers are subject to some form of cyberbullying. For

LGBTQ teenagers the percentage is even higher: 53%. When asked why people were so cruel online, one young boy explained, "You can be as mean as you want on Facebook." You can be vicious online because there is usually no consequence and often no accountability. Unlike face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying has no necessary stopping point. The schoolyard bully pretty much stays on the school yard. Thus, a victim can escape by going home or visiting a friend. Online bullying can follow the victim anywhere, 24–7. It is unremitting.

And cyberbullying has consequences, sometimes deadly ones. Fifteen-year-old Amanda threw herself in front of a bus after being bullied on FaceBook. Thirteen-year-old Rachel hanged herself after learning that an anonymous text calling her a slut had been distributed throughout her school. Eighteen-year old Tyler jumped to his death from a bridge after his roommate used a webcam to record him having sex with a man. And the list goes on and on.

Social Organizing and Civic Engagement

Communication scholars are also studying the ways that people use social media to share information and organize. Activists of all types rely on social media to stay informed, strategize, and raise public awareness. For instance, environmental activists increasingly rely on virtual networking to share information, debate issues, and plan interventions. Another example is using social media to challenge gender stereotypes. Consider Julia Bluhm. A savvy eighth grader, she was sick of airbrushed, digitally altered images of women in her *Seventeen* magazine. She sent out a call to her online network and quickly got 84,000 signatures in support of more realistic representations of girls and women. The editor of *Seventeen* met with Julia and signed a Body Peace Treaty, promising not to alter girls' body shapes and sizes. Julia is one of many young gender warriors who are using social media to raise consciousness and change sexist practices.

Closing

I could talk much longer about exciting work being done in the field of communication, but I've spoken long enough and you've been very patient. So let me sum up.

In my presentation, I have highlighted the field of communication's adaptation to the ever-changing character of society and citizens. Addressing social issues and needs has been central to the field of communication since its genesis on the Isle of Syracuse, and it will remain so in the future. Communication scholars and teachers will continue to do what they have always done: enlarge understanding of how communication works and equip people with the skills to be effective in the various spheres of life.

And that is why this field allows us to continually reimagine and remake the possibilities for how we work, live, form relationships, and participate in collective communities.