



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 39 – Addressing Ableism and Disabilities in the Communication Classroom

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Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Jim Cherney
Janell Johnson
Nathan Stewart
Sophia Maier

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Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*. This episode of *Communication Matters* was hosted by Trevor Parry-Giles, Professor of Communication at the University of Maryland.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Millions of students in the United States have disabilities. Now according to The National Center for Education Statistics, in 2018 alone, just over 19% of undergraduate students had a disability and 14% of all public elementary and high school students had a disability. These statistics demonstrate the importance of accommodating students with disabilities in all of our classrooms. And today's episode of *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast* addresses communication research particularly related to ableism and disabilities as well as some of the best practices for classroom and campus accessibility and inclusion. Joining me today are world-class scholars of disability studies and ableism and the like, all in the communication discipline, Jim Cherney, Janell Johnson, Nathan Stewart, and Sophia Maier.

First, let me tell you a little bit about today's guests. Jim Cherney is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. Dr. Cherney researches the rhetoric of ableism, especially in relation to sport and disability. Cherney authored the book *Ableist Rhetoric: How We Know, Value, and See Disability*. Cherney has also been active in NCA's Disability Issues Caucus and serves on NCA's Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access or IDEA Council. Hi, Jim, welcome to the podcast.

Jim Cherney:

Thank you for having me.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Janell Johnson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Dr. Johnson researches in the areas of rhetoric of health and medicine, science and technology studies, disability studies, bioethics, and environmental communication. Johnson is the author of *American Lobotomy: A Rhetorical History* and is also the Director of the University of Wisconsin's Disabilities Studies Initiative. Hi, Janell, welcome to the podcast.

Janell Johnson:

Hi, thanks for inviting me.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Nathan Stewart is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Lakeland University also in Wisconsin. Dr. Stewart researches in the areas of rhetorical theory, critical theory, and health communication. Stewart's research focuses on stigma associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and other disabilities. Stewart has also delivered a public lecture about accommodating students with disabilities when designing courses at the college level. Hi, Nathan, welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Nathan Stewart:

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And Sophia Maier is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Penn State University. Maier studies disability rhetorics, including the ways that such rhetorics interact with feminist theory, queer theory, colonial theory, and rhetorics of science. Maier is also active in NCA's Disability Issues Caucus. Hi, Sophia. Welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Sophia Maier:

Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Jim, we're going to start with you and your book *Ableist Rhetoric*. In that book, you note that such rhetoric represents one of the most widespread areas of systemic, systematic, and explicit discrimination. Yet ableism is really understudied, and you make that point. And it's not discussed very widely. So what are some examples of the widespread nature of ableism in Western culture. I'm thinking here of movies that people might have seen where you don't even realize that they're ableist. This ableism, how does it permeate our culture and our discourse?



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Jim Cherney:

Well, from the historical perspective, I'm investigating the ways that the roots of ableist thinking are penetrated and are perpetuated in our culture. In some cases like hate crime against a person in a wheelchair, we can recognize ableism very easily, and our society as a whole would reject that. But ableism is a lot more pernicious and dangerous in cases where the thinking that informs an ableist perspective is not perceived as relating to a disability, right? Or it might even be accepted as common sense. And so that's what I'm trying to look at. It's the stuff that systematizes those ways of thinking and ideas so that even when somebody isn't intending or isn't thinking about something in a particular way, the foundations of the able's perspective are present. And that's the kind of rhetoric that I want to expose is really rhetoric that goes without saying unquote, right? It's there in just the everyday acts. So for instance, in movies, one place that I see this rhetoric is in stories about demonic possession like *The Exorcist* because these communicate the idea that evil can be seen and can be known through the presence of physically deviant bodies, right? So if you don't understand that perception, if you don't look at the film as saying deviance is evil, then it doesn't make any sense. And it doesn't really matter how fictional or unrealistic those narratives are because that way of thinking is employed every time you watch that film. And then it goes on to become part of how you think, right? It becomes part of what your culture teaches you to see and perceive when you encounter someone with a very extremely visible disability. And so that's kind of the way that ableism sort of infiltrates I think in places where it's not even widely seen, right? I wouldn't say that *The Exorcist* is a film about disability, but I think it is a film that shows us something about ableism.

I could give you another example which is stairways, right? That's maybe the one that people talk about a lot. Stairs are everywhere in our culture, right? And we typically don't even think about these as anything except very useful kinds of ways of getting into buildings. But if everybody was a wheelchair user, we wouldn't have stairways, right? They simply wouldn't exist. And so their presence says something about who belongs in particular places. And when we think about, for instance, the ways that we use these grand marble edifices around our state buildings like the Capitol building or the Supreme Court building, that these are telling us something about who belongs there, right? Who has those rights as full citizens to be in those spaces. And that's what the Capitol steps crawl in 1990 was about when 60 plus demonstrators got out of their chairs or put their crutches behind and crawled up the Capitol steps to make the point that this was a place where they were not expected to go. And that's the kind of stuff that I try to get at in my book.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's interesting. I was worried there was a movie called stairways that I hadn't seen. So I understand what you're talking about. That's great. Speaking of popular culture, Janell, you've written about how lobotomies and the process of lobotomies in your book have been sensationalized in American popular culture. And I'm thinking a movie back when I was a kid very



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popular, acclaimed movies, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I was in mid-school, and that was my introduction to what a lobotomy was. And I remember my mother was very uncomfortable explaining to me from that movie what was going on. How do people understand or misunderstand lobotomies? And what does the history of lobotomies tell us about how we understand medicine and the treatment of mental illness and that sort of thing?

Janell Johnson:

Yeah. So *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a really great example. I mean very much in the same way that Jim was talking about the way that representations kind of filter into our understanding of the world. I think that movie more than just about anything else has shaped not just the way that we think about a lobotomy but about mental illness and specifically about psychiatric treatment. I think ECT, electro convulsive therapy, is another one that really comes to the fore with that movie. But when we think about lobotomy and what it means, lobotomy is the icon of bad medicine. If you want to demonstrate a way that medicine has the potential to go wrong, the way that it can harm people, the way that doctors can act unethically, the way that medicine can enact a kind of benevolent violence to use Jim Ferris's term, you turn to lobotomy, right? It's the icon. But this thinking is really a judgment, a judgment on the past and the way that people acted. And thinking about that judgment rhetorically opens up all kinds of interesting questions to the way that we understand history, the way we tell history, and also, the way that memory can impact not just popular culture but also the practice of science and medicine. It's really important to remember that in its day, lobotomy was the hallmark of scientific progress. Egas Moniz, the man who first developed psychosurgery was awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine, and a lot of people are surprised by this.

And so we think about what that has to tell us today. I think the real lesson that lobotomy has for us in the present is to be humble, to be aware that the brain in so many ways despite so many interesting developments in neuroscience and things like imaging technology and genetics and molecular psychiatry, all of these things that we use to understand the brain a little bit better, the brain is still really a black box in so many ways and it's likely to remain so for quite some time. We don't really have a rock solid understanding as to how many psychotropic drugs work, for example, so things like SSRIs. We know that they do something. We know that oftentimes that something is effective. But we don't necessarily know why. Now this doesn't mean that medicine is de facto bad or that it's the same as lobotomy or that something like ECT, electro convulsive therapy, is necessarily harmful. It just means that there's a lot that we still don't know, and it's very likely that future generations might look back on the use of something like Prozac or my favorite example here is something like chemotherapy with the kind of horror that we now view lobotomy.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's interesting. The whole discussion about mental illness, about lobotomy and all that brings up the issue of stigma as well. The extent to which a lot of these questions revolve around larger social perceptions and the way those manifest in interpersonal interactions. Nathan, you've been really interested in the ways that stigma attaches to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD. What are some of the stigmas that we generally associate with ADHD? I had some personal interactions with this vis-à-vis my children. And how do people with ADHD and in my case, their caregivers in the case of kids navigate these stigmatizing discourses?

Nathan Stewart:

Yeah. The variety of stigmas is pretty extensive but especially when you lump in the caregivers of ADHDers, you find a lot of overlap in the stigma with other disabilities that I think of as contested disabilities. And these are disabilities that while perhaps fairly mainstream in the medical and mental health world as it is now, there's a lot of disagreement in the general public about the legitimacy or causes of the issues that those that live with those experiences. Probably the most common I see is some form of that kid isn't X diagnosis. They just lack or have some excess of Y where Y is some seemingly common everyday solution like more corporal punishment or less TV and sugar. And in addition to the child then being labeled as nothing more than a delinquent, the caregivers are also implicated as lacking in their responsibilities. And that's I think a pretty big one. We see that with past discourse surrounding autism and parents of autistic children. I think the term was refrigerator mother. The kid was autistic because the mother wasn't warm and nurturing enough and just all sorts of things along that. So it's not just with ADHD. There's all sorts of other examples of this.

When I think about what I see specifically in education and higher education, I see an interesting comparison to the range of stigmatization that actually exists within medical and mental health discourse about ADHD. While rarely expressed in such extremes, there are two kind of polls in which this discourse plays out. One is ADHD is debilitating, right? Which often implies the numerous studies that do exist talk about the challenges that ADHDers face related to education, relationships, substance abuse, and things like that. A less vocal but still problematic assumption that ADHD like other issues discussed under the umbrella of mental health are actually nothing but strengths, unique ways of seeing the world that give those individuals gifts that most others don't possess. I would say in my experience with higher education, far more people express the ADHD as detriment perspective. There's some unique challenges with both. ADHD as detriment is harmful to the students when self-imposed and when used as a lens in which the student is perceived by faculty. Assumptions about inattentiveness, disorganization, and hyperactivity as those being inherently disruptive, that can be a hindrance to the student but also assumptions made by the faculty member. A student has X so Y must be true about them. Similarly, ADHD as gift narrative is problematic when you have a faculty member that ignores the lived experiences



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of an ADHDer that struggles to meet expectations. Constantly being told that you just need to harness your gift isn't helpful when it ignores the real experienced challenges that ADHDers can face. I don't really have a novel suggestion for how to navigate all of that. I do talk a lot about kind of that first step requires that you kind of begin reframing for the individual, reframing the co-existence of challenge and potential, right? So we can't have a discourse or a self-narrative that is one or the other. We have to acknowledge both because that's the way that we live our experiences. There are challenges but also potentials especially with I think that's an important narrative for ADHDers. I mean I've lived with ADHD all my life. Realized and accepted it 15 years ago when I was diagnosed. I'm still trying to figure out how to do it even after being immersed in all the communication theory and practice of people much smarter than I. But at the end of the day, if we don't begin to understand how to reframe our own personal narratives, we struggle to do the rest.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Which leads I think well into a discussion of how all of this gets implicated into issues of identity and the intersectionalities of identities with regards to disability but also race, class, gender, national origin, sexuality, disability, all of those ranges of social and political identities. Sophia, you've co-authored a minifesto about fitting in at institutions particularly academic ones. And it's about this notion of identity and how there's this intersectionality at work with all of these dimensions of personal identity. And in this essay, you write that it's no accident that 39% of trans folks identify as disabled compared to 15% of the general population. Can you talk a little bit more about the importance of this intersectionality when discussing these microaggressions and these discriminations that people face on the basis of this intersectional identity and in particular the role that disabilities might play in that identity formation and the reactions that people have towards that?

Sophia Maier:

Absolutely. And thank you so much for that extremely important question or a series of questions.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Sorry.

Sophia Maier:

It's a complicated topic, and that's partly the reason why we use the framing device of fractals in that particular article is because thinking about the ways that various systems of oppression and experiences of everyday life fit together into a more powerful narrative is very complicated. So I've been thinking a lot about the nature of accessibility, bigotry, and the interconnectedness of various struggles. One thing that I think is important to recognize is that without consideration of intersectionality, we might create this false narrative of progressivism in which we have like



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segregated and compartmentalized different kinds of vulnerability and not recognize the ways that these vulnerabilities interact to create a broader narrative. For example, some research I'm doing is into Tourette's syndrome. And something I'm recognizing is that the ability to receive a diagnosis but not only a diagnosis, an identity of having Tourette's syndrome requires one to have a distinct set of privileges to distinguish oneself from someone who is just plain crazy or someone who is uppity. It requires one to distinguish oneself and to lean on the privileges that one has to access those kinds of accommodations. Thinking without intersectionality requires one to sort of ignore the ways that different identities are leveraged against each other. For example, when I came out to my parents as trans, one thing that they said was, are you sure? I think there's something wrong with your brain which connects to the various ways in which I'm disabled. So using that example of my very psychiatric disorders as an excuse for transphobia is very common.

There are also lots of connections between disability and transgender identities. Many trans people experience trauma, for example, or eating disorders, anxiety, depression. Many trans people and many disabled people can't afford the medical care that they need. Many trans people are removed from their families and left without financial resources. Many disabled people also are left without financial resources because of various systemic financial oppressive systems. Both trans and disabled people experience job and housing discrimination. They are both the objects of sexual fetishes. They are vulnerable to sexual violence. They are both vulnerable to acts of casual bigotry. So we can see the various ways that these oppressive systems both coincide and collaborate together. Also, one might consider that many autistic people and people with BPD for various reasons tend to be gender diverse. There are various theories about that. One is that they might not subscribe to as many of the oppressive social standards that have given rise to gendered existence. So my thinking is that when teachers engage in questions of accessibility, they are actually making political decisions. They are deciding who will be at home in the classroom. So accessibility is the antithesis of bigotry to me. Something that I wish people understood about bigotry is that it rarely takes the form of overt hatred. It usually has to do with passive policies and practices that partake in different kinds of prejudices, for example, parents excluding their children, schools segregating and disciplining minority students, neoliberalism denying resources to various minorities. All these policies and practices create environments that make clear that certain people are unwelcome. And then afterwards, we are gaslit into thinking that it's our fault for this discrimination, that we are somehow too burdensome or too creepy or make people too uncomfortable to be welcome into these spaces. So I think that the ability to make one feel welcome and wanted is absolutely the responsibility of all of us. It has to do with making the active decision to defend and support students. Again, it's bigotry. We often find that we end up having to like, we minority students have to do the work of creating spaces for ourselves for inclusion. If other people want to help to make that happen, they actually need to put elbow grease into making these spaces accessible. It's not something you can just do passively. You have to actively work on it, and you have to actively give access to the whole



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student, not just individual segregated parts. So I think it goes with diagnosable disabilities. I think it goes with undiagnosed disabilities. I think it goes with gender identity and class and race. I think it goes far beyond just ADA compliance. I think we need to actually restructure the classroom to make people feel welcome.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. That kind of delves into the next question which is exactly what kinds of steps do we need to take beyond simply recognizing the intersectionality of identity. I'm interested in what institutions can do. You're right obviously that a lot of this gets placed on the trans individual, on the person with the disabilities. I'm curious as to what you think institutions need to be doing to creating that environment and welcoming the whole student and affirming the whole student.

Sophia Maier:

I think that's a fantastic question. One way that I would think about kind of reframing it from its usual idea of what can institutions do to avoid being wrong or being caught being bigoted in this negative sense, I think it might also be worthwhile to think about what institutions can do to participate in the agendas of liberation for transgender and disabled students. And to do that, they need to understand what this agenda is. I think transgender liberation, for example, is good for cis people. We aren't just trying to be valid. It's not just about getting names and pronouns memorized and correct. We are actually trying to free ourselves from oppressive gender norms, from job discrimination, from prejudice, from bigotry, and from capitalist exploitation. Same thing with disability advocacy. We are looking for ways to create accessibility, freedom of embodiment, freedom to be different, and an end to capitalist exploitation. They are fighting to end bigotry and discrimination and systems of hierarchy and domination. And to do that, we need to think about ways to restructure our class first by listening to advocates who are disabled and transgender and also thinking about what, like imagining what resources beyond what we consider to be the conventional classroom are possible to endorse these various advocacies. And that's both to create a space that's welcoming but also hopefully to make that space a source of power to change the world.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

This links up really nicely with Janell's work with the Disability Studies Initiative in Madison. Are you doing that kind of thing? Is Sophia's agenda and the manifesto work underway in Madison at Wisconsin?

Janell Johnson:

Yeah. Well, so we've had a lot of folks here doing work in disability studies for quite some time now. And so the organization that I'm a part of, UW Disability Studies Initiative, is a group of faculty and students who all have an interest in researching and teaching disability studies. So



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the initiative pretty much exists through the people who are part of it. And one of the cool things about it in terms of where we're spread through the institution, we have people from gender and women's studies, obviously from communication arts, psychology, education, English, really across the board. And we try to speak to people across campus. So obviously, disability is something that people have studied for a long time on college campuses. The thing is is that it's mostly been through places like rehabilitation and through the medical school, right? And one of the exciting things I think about disability studies is that it really is a transdisciplinary endeavor, and I find it most exciting actually when I am teaching students who are coming, for example, from pre-health majors who might have a sense that quality of life is something that we can quantify. I mean this is something that people teach in places like population health. And so I think one of the ways that we reach people is through our teaching and sort of looking through all of the different kinds of disciplines that are represented at an institution.

So for the last 10 years, the initiative has worked to raise awareness on campus about not just disability and disability culture but also, as Sophia was saying, the way that disability intersects in important ways with race and gender and sexuality and a host of other identities. And disability studies as a field is a crucial area of research that reveals how central disability and related concepts like ability and ableism are central to just about every facet of human life. And really paying attention to disability, which is one of the things I think is so exciting about disability studies, it totally shifts how you think about everything from personhood to history to the struggle for racial and gender justice to the structure of education itself. Folks like Margaret Price and Jay Dolmage have done some really important work in that area. And one of my favorite examples to use with my students that might be of interest to NCA folks is that disability has been central to the stories that we tell about things like public speaking from the very beginning. So for example, in a story of someone like Demosthenes, right? Demosthenes in very many ways is the story of a heroic overcomer, this term from disability studies, the story of him overcoming disfluency to become one of the most eloquent speakers of his age, right? And I think that there you have that story which is part of the discipline itself in sort of its earliest ages. And so I think within public speaking, think about the ways that norms of ability and communication are really into the structure of how we do something like teach public speaking, right? The way that we emphasize with our students, the importance of things like eye contact which might be hard for some folks who are neurodiverse. The way that we talk about overcoming anxiety in a public speaking situation. I mean even something like eloquence itself which I think more than just about anybody else, Joshua St. Pierre has done some really fantastic work about how we think about disfluency and how it relates to something like eloquence. So there within the institution itself but also within the discipline of communication itself, attention to disability has the chance to radically reframe just about every facet of the discipline.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's fascinating. That's great. But drilling down a little bit on particulars, Nathan, you've done some work with how it is we can use technology in particular in the classroom space and specifically what we can tell our listeners about strategies or best practices with regard to technology allowing us to maybe make the classroom a more inclusive and accessible space. Do you have any thoughts from this 30,000-foot level about disability studies to sort of specific steps we can take in the classroom?

Nathan Stewart:

Yeah. I was just going to say I really love this theme that's kind of emerging in some of the different threads of our scholarship about how what we're studying does not just apply or help people that have these experiences that we're talking about, right? This goes much farther beyond just those individuals. And so like with my own experience, what's been great is that I found in most of the strategies that you can implement using technology to accommodate disabilities, those also help those that don't have those same experiences. And it's something that I wish, I know a lot of my colleagues or some of my colleagues anyway view a lot of these different strategies as cumbersome and something that they have to do just for a few students when, in fact, if you look at things like educational psychology, this is the type of stuff that they're saying, no, this is more effective for everyone. So I like to think about, at least have it in the back of my head the idea of universal design as much as possible when I'm trying to develop courses. So I just talk a little bit about some of the stuff that I've been doing for a while. I think the most useful application of technology for accommodations we have right now is how we can implement a blended classroom format. And what I mean by a blended classroom format is a flexible course design which students can attend in class, they can participate live but remotely, or they can participate online only. And while there are limitations in text to speak technology for real-time captions and obviously we have to have conversations about access to technology, there are many things to be excited about if we can overcome some of those other issues.

Due to various disability experiences, some students struggle to express themselves through spoken word in real time. And so that chat function allows those students to still participate, to still engage which is essential for their confidence and self-esteem in the class. Some students worry about how they'll be perceived based on their appearance, and there's all sorts of different examples we can talk about here. But the one that I thought of is if a student that struggles with depression at a certain point in time has what some will refer to the spoons. I don't know if anybody's heard that term. I have the spoons to do this today. If they have the spoons to get ready or attend class, then virtual participation without the camera still allows them to gain the content in a similar way than if they were in the classroom. If that same student lacks the spoons to do either, they can still complete the coursework and content for their class on their own. The best part here is that no one needs to justify which option they're using by disclosing an



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accommodation to anyone. And while I wish we lived in a world in which disclosing an accommodation wasn't a problem, it is it kind of goes back to a lot of the stigma that I was talking about and perceptions of instructions, etc. So that's one of the big strengths there. And I've successfully used this type of course design in a variety of classes over the past four years. I've used Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams, I know Zoom would work. And there's all sorts of different platforms. But to me this is universal design. The course is designed to be flexible to meet students' needs regardless of why they choose to complete their coursework the way they do. It also has the benefit of being inclusive to many of those that experience disabilities.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It seems to me that a lot of that impetus for universal design emerged out of this COVID-19 pandemic as we were all frantically adjusting classes. Any other lessons that we can pull? Anybody, that you noticed or saw? Sophia, anything from the COVID-19 pandemic that you think can be harnessed in a post-COVID world to make classrooms more inclusive and accessible?

Sophia Maier:

Well, I'll just say briefly that disabled people have been advocating for online and virtual resources for a long time now, and they have often been denied. I think this pandemic reveals what universities are actually capable of if they are invested in accessibility for everyone. The possibility of leniency, time off, virtual resources, virtual PowerPoints, alternative assignments. The list goes on, and it seems like this only happens when there's leverage or money on the line.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, Jim, you might have some thoughts too about how all this works vis-à-vis our own personal endeavor at NCA with our convention because the same sorts of dynamics are at work in some ways although it's certainly less extensive, right? It's two days in November rather than 16 weeks. But you've been very involved with the Disability Issues Caucus. And can you talk about some of the work that the Disability Issues Caucus has done vis-à-vis the convention and NCA and how people can get involved?

Jim Cherney:

Yeah. Well, the caucus when it started in '97 when Jim Ferris began it, disability issues and concerns I think were sort of, well, they weren't very well written in academia. They weren't talked about a lot. And as with all the caucuses, the invention of the DIC gave an institutional presence to people who had these concerns, and it also gave us a business meeting and slots at the convention and a seat on the legislative assembly and so on. And it gave us a representative on as you mentioned the IDEA council. So that is somebody, the chair of that committee sits on NCA's executive committee and is therefore right in the middle of the process of figuring out how to do things like make NCA policy regarding access and so forth. And a lot of that for us at the



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DIC comes down to how to make the convention more accessible, right? Locating convention accessible spaces. Finding out how we can navigate a hotel or a conference center is something that NCA's been doing since back in I think 2004 was the first time we did a site audit. It's also important to have the kinds of technology that allows an accessible presentation and the recognition that this can incorporate things like presentations where some of the people are present only virtually is I think really important because of the kinds of access that can provide. And I think that Nathan's talking about the ways that accommodations can benefit other people. I think the fundamental basis for that is because accommodations are done by providing access, and access is important for lots of people, right? Increased access can benefit people who might not even specifically need that access in order to use that particular technology.

But I think the other point that Nathan's making that we need to keep in mind is the importance of the flexibility of what he's calling the blending because technology is made by and for bodies. It's made with assumptions about what bodies can and should be able to do. And while technology can be great for increasing access, it can also be something that has its limitations. It can be something that creates its own barriers. The telephone is a great example which expanded access to be able to communicate across distances and with people in real time in ways the telegram and so forth and other things couldn't do. But it also became a way of isolating people who were deaf or people who couldn't use the phone. And somehow that's a lesson that we keep forgetting, right? We say, okay, here's this wonderful technology. Look what the technology can do. Yeah, this technology has a lot of potential. There's a lot of stuff it can do. But I think we need to be concerned about the ways that it also can be a limitation. It also can be something that creates a barrier for some people. I mean I keep going back to the stairs because they're so basic, they're so obvious, and they're so central. Somebody who's looking at them recognizes that all over our world are these signs saying for walkies only, right? That's what they're communicating on a daily basis, and nobody's really thinking about it. So yeah, I think the caucus has done an awful lot and has the potential to do a lot of things. And I really encourage people to get involved. I want to make sure that people understand that you don't have to have a disability or be identifying yourself as disabled to be a member of the caucus. You don't have to be disabled to be anti-ableist any more than you have to be a person of color to be anti-racist. So people who are interested in the work we're doing should join in, right? They should join the caucus. It doesn't cost you anything to add it on to your affiliations. Submit papers to us. Come to the business meeting. There's a lot of work to be done, and the access that we can provide is not just useful for undermining ableism and the immediate impacts of it but also changing the kinds of ways our society allows people to interact so that more people can do that effectively.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. Spoken like a true leader of the Disability Issues Caucus. Come to the business meeting. Lastly, I guess is the sort of \$64,000 question, the communication matters question,



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right? We like to think of the communication matters as not just the title but also theme of our little podcast here. And I'm interested in how all of you might reflect upon what communication particularly as a discipline, and I loved some of the points that Janell was making with regard to Demosthenes and all that. I'm a good old rhetorician so that's always fun. But what are some of the ways that we think of communication and the scholarship and the teaching that we do has particularly important for disability studies, for reshaping public knowledge and perceptions about disabilities, any thoughts on that?

Janell Johnson:

One of the words that immediately comes to mind is norms which is a really key term for disability studies. And we think about what communication does and a lot of what folks have been saying today is that communication helps to establish those norms, right? They come through structures of meaning that percolate over time. But obviously, as we know very well, communication can also help to challenge those norms, to kind of break them apart, to see how they work. And so you have that kind of liberatory potential there as well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, Sophia.

Sophia Maier:

Yeah. So I 100% agree with Dr. Johnson. I think that's absolutely wonderful. And my only point is that my current research is looking at the ways the disabled rhetoric totally changes the foundations of rhetorical theory. If we think of rhetoric as coming from the body and the mind, imagine all the ways that different body minds create different systems of rhetoric. It's not just that communication scholars are obligated to address disability, which they are, but also that disability and disabled people enrich the field in extraordinary ways.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I like that.

Nathan Stewart:

Yeah. If I can kind of add to that, I think Janell mentioned the work of Margaret Price, and she talks a lot about norms and academia and things along those lines. And I think what's critical about communication scholarship is putting our lived experiences and the lived experiences of others into our work. And in order to do that, I mean we do a great job of it now, but we can do better if we have more people. And I just think about a conversation that, so Jim was my PhD advisor, a conversation that him and I had when I was thinking about what I want to do for a dissertation, what I want to do for a research agenda. And I was legitimately concerned about if I talk about ADHD, are they going to immediately associate a disability with me even if I don't talk



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about my personal experience and is that going to hinder my ability to get a job? And now that I'm in academia and I see the blatant stigma that some faculty members, I mean I don't think I was, I don't think that concern was unwarranted. And so I think something the communication scholarship can do is to learn from what we have now available with the scholarship and open that access and make sure that we're not using those learned stigmas to prevent more voices from, and I know that's not unique to disability issues. There's all sorts of access concerns in academia but I think that's one thing where we can really use our voices a lot better.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, that's great.

Jim Cherney:

I think that the word access, and we've been hearing it a lot throughout the entire conversation, today is an important sort of thing in ways that we can recognize how words like access can become sort of what McGee talked about as idiographs. They can become things that are a container for a whole set of ideas and values. And so part of what we can understand through things like rhetorical analysis of the words that we use, around disability, and around ableism and around access is recognize the ways that the kind of power and potential that those have and how making those central to the conversations that we have about say disability or ableism can be important to changing how we view and think about these things. Ableism is taught. It's communicated to us. We didn't start out ableist. We learned it from our culture and all the ways that it's communicated to us that tells us how commonsensical it is and how basic it is and how easy it is. And it's most powerful when nobody thinks about it and how it's working, and that's one of the things that communication scholars I think inherently are interested in is how do these kinds of things work. We need to figure it out.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And how they become normalized which goes back to Janell's point. Yeah. Well, thank you all. This was great. I think this was an important *Communication Matters* episode to have at this time and at any time to talk more about what we can do individually and institutionally and systemically and as an association to increase access, to increase inclusion and accessibility. That's really important. So thank you all for joining me today on *Communication Matters, The NCA Podcast*.

Jim Cherney:

Thank you.

Janell Johnson:

Thanks, Trevor.



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Sophia Maier:

Thank you.

Nathan Stewart:

Thank you.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

And thank you, listeners, once again as always for tuning in. And please don't forget hit subscribe wherever you listen to your podcasts.

NCA News:

In NCA News, NCA and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication recently hosted “Covering Anti-Asian Violence: A Workshop for Journalists and Scholars.” More than 60 people attended this virtual workshop, which offered tips for journalists and scholars interested in writing about Asians and Asian Americans, especially stories relating to anti-Asian violence. Watch a recording of the workshop today at [Youtube.com/NationalComm](https://www.youtube.com/NationalComm)!

Also in NCA news, join NCA's Officers for another Conversation with NCA Leadership on Tuesday, August 24 at noon eastern time! NCA Officers will give brief updates about issues that are relevant to NCA members, including 2021 convention plans, outcomes from the most recent Executive Committee meeting, and the status of multiple Task Forces and other initiatives that the leadership is undertaking. At least 30 minutes will be devoted to attendee questions, comments, and discussion. Visit natcom.org/calendar for Zoom call information.

And, as you're preparing for the fall semester, be sure to review NCA's teaching resources on the NCA website. The resource page includes guides for adapting to hybrid and online classes including infographics about asynchronous learning, tips on connecting with students while teaching online, journal articles about communication amid crises and disasters, and more! Visit natcom.org/online-teaching today!

And, listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the next episode of Communication Matters on September 9. The episode focuses on the NCA Center for Communication, Community Collaboration, and Change, or CCCC, which is currently hosted by the University of North Carolina Greensboro. Joining the podcast are CCCC Director Spoma Jovanovic, UNC-G Communication Studies Department Head Roy Schwartzman, Corner Farmers Market Manager Kathy Newsom, and CCCC Project Coordinator Jessica Clifford.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get



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your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world.

The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives. *Communication Matters*, organized at the national office in downtown Washington DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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