



## Our Unfinished Agenda by Michael Osborn

Some very happy people are soon going to be walking up here to receive your applause. It is a glorious walk, and these will be unforgettable moments in their lives. But the moments are significant for the rest of us as well. For to recognize them is to confirm the presence of excellence in our professional community, and to affirm that SCA continues to honor conspicuous attainments in research, teaching, and service. These moments will soon join others in a chain of memory that connects all SCA awards luncheons. So today's celebration of excellence is only the most recent episode in a growing **tradition** of excellence that places all of us in time. It is indeed a beautiful day.

These of course are observations that anyone might make on such an occasion, but for me they obviously have special meaning. Today I conclude my three years as an officer of SCA. Looking back, this has been an eventful, perhaps even turbulent time in our professional community: anytime you lose a person who has devoted a quarter of a century of service to you—literally *one-third the life of this association*—that is bound to be a traumatic parting. But this has also been a time of growth for us, and if we have lost Bill Work to retirement, we have also gained Jim Gaudino, whose optimism and energy are already fully engaged in many constructive projects. It seems to have been a full time, and yet again so brief a time, when I consider all the unfinished items on SCA's agenda. Today I want to share with you my vision of that unfinished agenda and all of its challenge and promise. It concerns our structure, services, recruitment, and identity. It will call, not just for Outreach, but for a complementary and perhaps even more profound effort of Inreach, as we seek within ourselves to find and build our place in the academic sun.

Our Task Force concerning SCA's structure has been *grappling* with the incredible profusion of interests that now crowd together under the SCA umbrella. How can we deal with all these interests in a fair and orderly way? How can we control this growth, so that profusion does not become confusion? This Task Force, led so ably by David Zarefsky, has already made a number of constructive proposals that have been adopted by this year's Legislative Council (See "Task Force" story on page 2). The Task Force will now go back to work to develop guidelines consistent with these reforms, which will be considered at next year's San Francisco convention. So we are improving, I believe, the structure of SCA, its structural capacity to accommodate growth and change.

Vital services must also receive our attention. Now we eagerly await the appearance of two new journals under SCA sponsorships, *Text and Performance Quarterly* and the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. You have no idea of the time and commitment required to bring about the sponsorship of a new journal. So today I want to applaud and recognize the truly devoted service SCA has received for the last three years from the outgoing Chair of the Publications Board, Jim Chesebro (See "Publication" story on page 3). On the Administrative Committee we used to say that the combination of Jim Chesebro and acid rain would surely decimate the tree population of America. The sheer correspondence required to negotiate these new journals into being has been enormous. And the gift of service that Jim Chesebro has given us will resonate for many years. Jim, thank you!

We are moving in other areas of service as well. The SCA Placement Service, for example, is for many of us the most vital service SCA performs at a critical juncture in our personnel lives. The service has performed well, but many of you have asked me: might it not be improved? Could it not serve a broader constituency, professional and artistic as well as academic interests, senior teachers and scholars as well as first-position applicants? Could its procedures be made more flexible and informative for the sake of search committees? I have asked Nina-Jo Moore to head up a Task Force to consider these and other possibilities, and we look forward to the findings and recommendations of this group.

The Administrative Committee has also assumed an aggressive stance in improving essential services. For example, just this September we voted to lift our limit on Special Project awards from \$500 to \$1500,

or to whatever the limit might be on interest earned from the Special Projects fund. This should have a stimulating effect on research-oriented conferences or projects, and hopefully might encourage some of you to consider contributions to the Special Projects fund itself. I am confident that service will continue to be a high priority under the aggressive leadership of my friend, Gus Friedrich.

What do I mean by recruitment, and why does it deserve prominence on our unfinished agenda? I mean reaching out to bright undergraduates who might be interested, even fascinated, by the research and teaching opportunities in our field, if only they were encouraged. And here I must say that SCA has been sadly neglectful. We have devoted precious few resources and little time to assuring that the flow of talent into our field will continue and grow. The best undergraduate research is not showcased at our national conventions, and we seem to take for granted that someone else will do the job of recruitment for us.

**The situation must now change.** I have asked Steve Smith to chair a Task Force that will assume leadership in this area, and help us develop some creative options. Steve has been a leader at the University of Arkansas in developing the Lambda Pi Epsilon Communication Honor Society, which emphasizes excellence in undergraduate scholarship. Thus conceived, this society functions as a complement to the long established communication honor societies that have emphasized excellence in competitive speech performance. I am happy to report that SCA accepted affiliation with Lambda Pi Epsilon at our last meeting of the Administrative Committee, and I invite you to correspond with Steve concerning how your college or university might receive a Lambda Pi Epsilon charter. This of course is only a beginning, even if a particularly bright one, and Steve's Task Force will probe other interesting possibilities. Would it, for example, be possible and desirable to form an alliance among the various undergraduate research conferences, perhaps under the aegis of Lambda Pi Epsilon, and to feature their best young scholars in SCA convention programs? Ought SCA itself to sponsor a National Undergraduate Honors Conference in Communication Studies? Following a model such as that developed by my colleague, Walter Kirkpatrick, we could invite our finest scholars to conduct each year intensive seminars and workshops for young people selected competitively from across the nation. I think we can anticipate some heady and concrete initiatives from Steve's committee, and we ought to assign them high priority.

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*"We continue to struggle to bring who we are and what we do into focus . . ."*

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So I come to the final and most complex item on our unfinished agenda. Our identity. We continue to struggle to bring **who we are** and **what we do** into focus, both for ourselves and for others. Frank Dance once wrote in *Spectra* about his conversations with strangers on airplanes, and of his efforts to explain to others what he taught.<sup>1</sup> All of us have been in Frank's seat, and have experienced perhaps that particular awkwardness. But I sometimes move in humbler circles, and I can report that the problem remains the same there. Some months ago I was fishing with a country friend in a little creek off the Tennessee River. It was a hot day, and the fish were all asleep, which seemed rather sensible. So I was drifting just a bit myself, when suddenly this fellow sat up, spat some tobacco juice into the creek, and said: "Just what the hell is it you teach?" (as though I could teach anything. Or that whatever I taught must surely be suspect in some practical if not ideological way). I have also been confronted by the same question, asked with less innocence and more malevolence, by unfriendly deans during problem evaluation visits: "What is your field, and what does it try to do?"

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There are those who ascribe this uncertainty to some collective character flaw in us: for instance, why, they say, are we always trying to change our name? Do we think we are going to resolve our identity problems by a simple change of title?

Well, I for one am proud of our heritage as scholars of speech. I remain fascinated by the power and mystery of the spoken word, especially on public occasions, when it can work great goodness or great

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wickedness. Among all human artifacts it has profound and neglected stories to tell about the people among whom it is produced: Hegel once commented that in the words of great public leaders one can often read the drift and destiny of civilizations, trace the arc of public consciousness as it rises and recedes in their discourse.<sup>2</sup> So I am a great lover of speech. But I do have considerable doubt about the efficacy of the term “speech” in the title of our national association. And I know that many of you share that doubt, and that you have for some time. In his 1968 Presidential Address—twenty years ago!—my old friend and mentor, Douglas Ehninger, reported the following: “. . . Everywhere I have gone this year I have found persistent questioning about the nature of our field—about what we are and what we ought to become. . . Should we properly be called Speech, or Communication, or Speech Communication . . . ?”<sup>3</sup> In 1969 John Dietrich introduced the report of the New Orleans conference with these observations:

As early as 1962, many members of the Association felt that the term “speech” was inadequate to express the total concerns of the Association. In 1964, the Executive Committee of the Association proposed a national survey to determine whether or not the term “communication” would best represent the characteristics of the central area of study . . .

It is important to recognize that the selection of the term speech-communication represents an attempt to link divergent points of view in the field. The selection of this term for the project is not thought to be, by the members of the Research Board or by the officers of the Association, a definitive solution to the problem of nomenclature.<sup>4</sup>

And, indeed it was not a solution!

About three years ago we finally confronted this issue directly. Nearly 55% of us voted to change the name of our association to American Communication Association. But because our Constitution requires a two-thirds vote to make such changes, the new name could not go into effect. And so I have argued around the country this year that the majority vote constituted at least a presumption for another vote. For it is clear that the momentum towards a name change continues to grow. Just this year, Southern changed its name to Southern States Communication Association. Just this year, Central States changed its name to Central States Communication Association. So it would seem that the base of support for the term “Speech Communication” continues to erode.

My friends and colleagues, we need once again to confront this ancient and unfinished part of our agenda. On Thursday the Legislative Council—with one dissenting vote—passed a Constitutional resolution calling for us to change our name to the American Communication Association. So you will soon have a chance to register your convictions again on this issue.

Why do I support the name change, despite my speech background and my continuing fascination for the public oration? Well, for one thing I am keenly aware of the discomfort of many of my colleagues, especially

those in mass or applied communication or who emphasize quantitative modes of inquiry, with the “speech” designator. It seems to me that we have grown to the limits of that name, and that it is now stretched and distended in such a way that it might impede the natural growth and development of our association. There is power in a name, and it can constrain. Moreover, I have learned the discomfort of trying to represent a national association that does not even have the national designator in its title. I found that when I was being introduced to outside groups as President of SCA, introducers would somehow feel obligated to explain, “Now that’s their ‘national’ association.” It was always an awkward moment of having to establish my and your *ethos*, and I was always slightly embarrassed by it. Jim Gaudino will have this same problem, as he tries to build our Outreach mission in Washington. So we need the national designator.

My other reason for supporting the name change has to do with personal experience. Some years ago my home department (going, I must confess, against my initial position!) changed the “speech” part of its name to “communication.” Based on subsequent experience with that change, I disagree with those who argue that changing the name won’t make a difference in our institutional life. *It will make a difference, and most of that difference will be salutary!* Names, as Kenneth Burke has taught us, are **perspectives**, and to change our name in the manner proposed will give us a fresh and perhaps more accurate perspective on who we are and what we have become. We found in my own departmental experience that the new name seemed to license new growth, to encourage the study of communication down whatever paths and in whatever forms or frames of reference seemed appropriate or necessary. Public address was not abandoned—indeed, its study was invigorated. I could now see it more clearly as it operated in modes of human communication other than the public oration. It was easier to see the limitations and the advantages of the public speech—see when it was least effective, or when it was best suited to advance or retard some rhetorical process emerging within the public domain. I could now see the public oration within a broader sphere of communication dynamics.

Moreover, to change our national name will **not** be to abandon the study of speech. I think that “speech” does belong—as a specific title—in our divisional structure. Should we change our name, my name will be among the first on a petition to create a division called “speech” or “oral” communication. I predict it will instantly be quite a powerful division, and within it I am sure there will be no loss of identity.

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*“We have been seeking or perhaps clinging to a lost center of our discipline. . . . But, what if that lost center has now disappeared?”*

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**Identity.** Both the issue and the word continue to echo in my mind. I remember a dear friend saying just recently, as we were discussing the major issues in our field, “If only we could resolve the identity question.” What a plaintive observation. What has happened, I think, is that we have allowed ourselves to be betrayed by an organizational metaphor. We have been seeking or perhaps clinging to a lost **center** of our discipline, as though identity itself might then radiate out from that center through all the spheres or orbits of SCA. But what if that lost center has now disappeared? And here is an even more radical possibility: what if there never really was such a center? What if that circular figure is only a mirage in our institutional memory? Whatever the status of that lost or illusory center, could it be that our identity is better described in terms of an overall field of relationships among clusters of professional interests, located principally within the various divisions of SCA, and that the only name broad enough to encompass that wide ranging field of relationships, and to accommodate other related clusters of interests that surely will emerge in the future, is the term “communication”? By this metaphor, which replaces a kind of Ptolemaic with a more Copernican conception, our identity does not radiate from some center, but rather exists in the broad and dynamic

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configuration within that field, ever changing and growing in response to the technological and social changes which have revolutionized human communication in our time. Our identity is uncertain and **must** be uncertain because of the nature of the subject-matter we have chosen to engage.

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Consider for a moment the organizational implications of this fundamental change in figuration. If there is no true center of SCA, from which all identity radiates, then there is also no hierarchy of importance among our various groups. Some of us are not closer nor further from that mythical center than others. Rather, all of us contribute to the collective identity by the place we occupy within a large configuration of relationships. All of us become vital and essential. Therefore, this change in metaphors also makes us more open to new possibilities, more receptive of emerging interests. No longer do we tolerate our diversity as a necessary evil or even as an embarrassment—rather, we welcome it as an inevitable strength.

And frankly, this squares with my own enjoyment of SCA, especially of our national conventions. To come to an SCA convention for me is like visiting an international marketplace—there is a wonderfully discordant babble of voices. On the one hand, an oral interpreter, caught up in the esthetics of communication, intones sonorously. On another side stands some rhetorical devotee, chanting the sacred mysteries of Kenneth Burke. On that far corner, dressed in arcane robes, stand the number-crunchers, arguing fiercely among themselves. Driving by in their BMW's are the Applied Communicologists, who presently are upwardly mobile in SCA. Mixing in the general crowd scene are the health communication folks, some lonely and lost graduate students, the teachers of speech on a rare holiday, and a few drunken deans. Somehow the whole scene makes sense.

So perhaps what we need to change in addition to a name is a metaphor, so that we can better accept what we have already actually become.

The final Task Force I have designed ties directly to the question of Identity, and to this new figurative conception of who we are and what we do. For if our identity is constituted in the relationships among our wide ranging clusters of interests, then surely these relationships may be defined more precisely in terms of the research and teaching goals we seek and especially with respect to the primary questions that drive our inquiries.

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And so, in the spirit of New Orleans Conference and of the National Developmental Project on Rhetoric, and as we approach our 75th anniversary, I have formed a Task Force on Basic Research Goals and Questions, which will be co-chaired by Richard Gregg and Sally Jackson. Each Division has been asked to elect a representative to this task force, and each representative has been asked in turn to convene a divisional committee to formulate the primary questions that generate research within the division. All the other sub-units of SCA have likewise been invited to consider the nature of primary questions in the research

and teaching missions they undertake. Each list of questions, complete with rationale and a bibliography representing the best research upon them, will be submitted to the Task Force for consideration. This group, meeting perhaps at some time next summer, will select, focus, and synthesize the primary questions which best span and relate the various clusters of interests configured in SCA. Perhaps at a pre-convention meeting in San Francisco next year, or in meetings during that convention, or in a document SCA might publish and circulate, we may get a more precise reading on that relational, functional identity that really is our professional association.

Imagine just for a moment the advantages of such a document. Wouldn't it be pleasant, whenever some suspicious administrator asks, “What is your field, and what does it do?” to be able to produce a document identifying the primary questions we ask, the rationale behind them, and readings that represent our best scholarship upon them? Wouldn't it be an advantage to be able to study such a document as a first step in graduate education around the country? Such a document could then be updated perhaps every decade or so, so that if we remain in touch with the constantly changing saga of communication in our time.

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Clearly, I am excited about the potential of this Task Force. Perhaps through these various initiatives and changes of perspective, we can confront decisively and constructively, and perhaps even lay to rest, the old ghost of the identity issue.

I am afraid that I leave you with quite an unfinished agenda, matters vitally concerned with association structure, services, recruitment, and identity. Yet at the same time I feel that I have completed a very satisfying time in my life. Thank you for granting me this time, and for the many dear friendships formed as we have worked together.

On some rare occasions during this work, I have heard good people say that they have given up on SCA. Those have always been sad

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moments for me. Because those people are wrong! This is *our* Association, and it will be and do what we want it to be and do. We need to make it work better for us, and for our students, and for the community we serve.

In his 1963 Carnegie Hall concert, Pete Seeger rallied his audience to the cause of the Civil Rights movement. He called for “hands and hearts and heads, human beings,” to help that embattled cause. That's what we need now. Hands and hearts and heads, human beings, to meet the challenge and to realize the promise of our unfinished agenda.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Frank E.X. Dance, “Seat Belts on. Tray Tables Up. Let's Go!” (Presidential Message), *Spectra*, 18 (February 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1953), 4–5.

<sup>3</sup>Douglas Ehninger, “Of Relevance, Relatedness, and Reorientation” (Excerpts from the 1968 Presidential Address), *Spectra*, 5 (February 1969).

<sup>4</sup>John E. Dietrich, “Conference Background and Procedures,” *Conceptual Frontiers in Speech-Communication*, ed. Robert J. Kibler and Larry L. Barker (New York: Speech Association of America, 1969), 4.