

1993 Presidential Address**“The Postmodern Public”**

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This convention marks the 25th anniversary of my membership in the Speech Communication Association. I vividly remember walking the halls of the old Sheraton-Chicago Hotel in 1968, dazzled by the prospect of seeing and hearing scholars whose work I had read and admired -- people such as Douglas Ehninger, Marie Hochmuth Nichols, and Donald Bryant, who were

then the officers of the Association. Never would I have dreamed that 25 years later I would be asked to stand in the same place, representing you and serving as an advocate for our profession.

My years as an officer, and before that as member and chair of the Finance Board, have been an immensely rewarding experience. I've had the opportunity to meet and know many of you, to learn so much about our rich and diverse discipline, and to help strengthen our national association -- giving something back to a profession which has given so much to me. I've profited from the chance to work with my predecessors Michael Osborn, Gus Friedrich, Mark Knapp, Dennis Gouran, and Dale Leathers, and with my successors Bruce Gronbeck, Sharon Ratliffe, and Jim Chesebro. And it has been a delight to work so closely with our gifted and energetic Executive Director, Jim Gaudino, and with the dedicated men and women who staff the National Office. We are fortunate to have him, and them.

So many people have helped and supported me during these years. I want especially to thank my family -- my wife Nikki, and my children Beth and Marc, all of whom are here today -- for giving me moral support and sharing me with SCA these past six years. I am indebted to my colleagues at Northwestern; to doctoral students Jim Beard, Kirt Wilson, and Robert Terrill, each of whom spent some time with me on SCA matters; and particularly to my devoted assistant, Jean Schaeffle, the pleasant voice many of you encountered on the telephone, who added SCA to the other burdens of her office. Finally, I owe a great debt to you, my fellow members of SCA, for giving me this opportunity to serve. It is a privilege I shall always treasure and an experience I shall never forget.

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Vice President Gronbeck, Vice President Ratliffe, my colleagues and friends; ladies and gentlemen:

On the ninth of December, in the fateful year 1857, the senior U.S. Senator from the state of Illinois rose in his place in the old Senate Chamber, broke ranks with the President he had helped to elect, and then declared that on the great issue of the day -- the

possible extension of slavery into Kansas Territory, "I don't care whether slavery is voted down or voted up."

That statement by Stephen A. Douglas was soon taken out of context, by none so gleefully as Abraham Lincoln. He would ridicule the Little Giant as morally obtuse, basing his policy on "caring nothing about the very thing that every body does care the most about." Douglas meant nothing of the kind. His point was that he was opposed to the Lecompton Constitution no matter how the referendum on slavery came out, so riddled was the document with other flaws.

In a larger sense, though, Lincoln's criticism was on the mark. The essence of Douglas' "popular sovereignty" was that slavery was not a fit subject for discussion by the whole people acting through the public forum. Rather, it was to be determined by the individual decisions of settlers who went to Kansas to live. "Public opinion" was but the aggregate of private beliefs. Lincoln opposed this view, asserting in Ottawa, in the first debate of the Senatorial campaign, "In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed." When Lincoln spoke of public sentiment, he meant the common knowledge shared by the public in general, judgment which guided public affairs.

## I

The clash between Douglas and Lincoln about the nature of the public reverberates through our history. At times we have celebrated the public sphere as a metaphorical space where citizens come together to deliberate about their common affairs, developing a sense of judgment which guided action. At other times we have lamented the eclipse of the public, the inability of society to deliberate together. Our communal decisions have devolved to individuals, been delegated to experts, or simply deferred.

Our current situation is like the second case. We widely question the efficacy and legitimacy of the public sphere and we distance ourselves from it. These developments pose a serious challenge to the future of our society and to the discipline of speech communication. They also, however, afford us the opportunity to reformulate and thus reclaim the public sphere.

Like a good postmodernist, I will not define too many terms. The public sphere encompasses citizens deliberating about common affairs, as distinct from personal or private concerns. It is characterized by a focus on the best interests of the larger community, including everyone not immediately present. Those who speak in the public sphere do so on behalf of people in general rather than any specific persons. "The public" implies people; "the public sphere" implies a place; and "the public forum" implies an opportunity for communication. I tend to use these terms interchangeably.

Nor does it matter much whether such a thing as a disinterested public forum ever "really" existed or is a nostalgic idealization. Certainly the 18th century coffeehouses in which Habermas located the public sphere were accessible to but a small fraction of white middle-class males of the Enlightenment. And the 19th century American exemplars, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, were romanticized, too. The thousands who spent the day under the August sun or October rain with children in tow, holding picnics

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and shopping at market stands, were not always following the intricacies of a three-hour debate they probably could not even hear. The value of the public forum is not as an empirical reality but as a norm, a standard by which to regulate and judge our communication. As Michael Schudson concludes, the concept is "indispensable as a model of what a good society should achieve."

And yet the ideal, or even the idea, of the public forum has taken quite a beating over the years. It was challenged first by the application of quantitative measurement to opinion, beginning with straw polls in the early 19th century and becoming far more complex in our own day. Measurement not only transformed "public opinion" from a normative to an empirical concept; it also changed it from a collective to an aggregate noun.

In this respect, Douglas was far more "modern" than Lincoln. If one holds to his view, we divine the public will by adding up the score. There is really nothing to deliberate about, no reason for a community to search together for *phronesis*, practical wisdom. Politicians sometimes are ridiculed for consulting the latest polls in order to determine their own convictions. But by this sense of "public opinion," that approach to governance may be the most efficient and the most accurate -- even though it weakens the ideal of the public forum.

A second threat to the public forum is the cult of technical expertise, implying that issues are too complex for ordinary citizens to understand. This is nothing new. Seventy years ago, Walter Lippmann wrote perhaps his most pessimistic book, *The Phantom Public*. There he suggested that the citizen had been saddled with an impossible task, that education could not keep pace with the dizzying rate of change, and that people could not be expected to pay attention to problems except at the crisis stage. The only solution he saw was to abdicate to experts the task of forming opinions.

During the 1960's, President Kennedy declared that the problems of the modern economy were technical, not ideological. President Carter did the same on energy policy; President Reagan, on strategies of nuclear deterrence. I hope that the same thing will not happen to the current health care debate.

Obviously I am not here to bash technical expertise. Most of us spent many years of advanced study so that we might profess a subject with authority based on expertise. But to define a problem as fundamentally technical, managerial, or administrative -- rather than public -- is to narrow the range of people deemed capable of addressing it, a narrowing that weakens the power of the public sphere.

The public forum is fundamentally about politics, and a third factor weakening it in our time is a growing sense that politics no longer works. Whether the cause is Vietnam, Watergate, divided government, the cynicism of the 80's, or whatever, the trends are unmistakable. Since the 1950's, the National Election Study has been asking voting-age adults whether they agree or disagree with the statement, "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think." In forty years the percent agreeing has risen from 36 to 59. In 1964, only 31 percent of Americans thought that government was run by "a few big interests"; in 1991 the figure was 71 percent. In 1958, 46 percent of those polled said that government wasted a lot of money; by 1991 that figure had reached 75 percent. Focus-group studies by the Kettering Foundation of college students' views on politics confirm these survey data and

suggest that we are educating students who do not think that politics matters to them.

(By the way, I realize that I have just resorted to the same sort of aggregate statement about public opinion I discussed earlier. I do so to make a point about individuals. They are losing a sense that government matters to them or takes them seriously.)

How this sense of low efficacy weakens the public sphere was summarized by the journalist E. J. Dionne: "... we have lost our sense of common citizenship. ... Americans have become increasingly skeptical about whether public engagement could ever produce much of value." If public life offers so little chance of making a difference, then why should one become involved?

Perhaps the most-often cited threat to the health of the public forum, though, is the fourth: the prominence of mass media. It was Habermas who chronicled the declension from the public sphere to the mass society, the replacement of critical public discourse by the consumption of culture. As Craig Calhoun has characterized this history, "the public sphere was turned into a sham semblance of its former self. ... The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only. ... [It] has become more an arena for advertising than a setting for rational-critical debate." Yet, by a kind of false consciousness, "the degenerate mass public sphere understands itself on the model of its more effective predecessor," so that thoughtful people are not aware of how much they have lost.

The mass media have been made this generation's scapegoat for problems ranging from urban violence to the degradation of women, from declining Scholastic Aptitude Test scores to reduced turnout at the polling place. Serious students of the media know that these causal claims often are no stronger than was that underlying the 19th century fear that the invention of the bicycle would make the art of reading obsolete. And yet the penetration of our culture by mass media has not been without effect. Since the media serve mainly as sources of entertainment, that context frames the treatment of mediated public discussion.

We watch televised speeches, newscasts, documentaries, and debates in order to be entertained. We are disengaged from the discourse, viewing it passively, as spectators. We see controversial issues and election choices as if they were sporting contests in which winning and losing are valued for their own sake. In the 19th century, the function of entertainment was found in public discourse. The lyceum address or the commemorative oration offered pleasure as well as learning. Now it is in reverse. The function of public discourse is found in entertainment. There is a world of difference between the Webster-Calhoun debate on the Senate floor over nullification and the tariff of 1833, and the Gore-Perot "debate" on *Larry King Live* over the North American Free Trade Agreement and the tariff of 1993.

The public sphere has indeed been under attack. The measurement of opinion has reduced it from a collective to an aggregate concept, from a normative to an empirical condition. The cult of expertise has excluded many from its domain and the sense that they cannot be effective has led others to opt out. Cultural dominance of the mass media has trivialized the public sphere and robbed it of vitality.

These challenges are not new. What may be new, however, is to see the erosion of the public sphere as a reality to be accepted rather than a danger to be fought. This shift in attitude denies the ideal of the public sphere itself. It is a product of the critical perspective

known as postmodernism. Postmodernism began as a revolt against modernist conventions in architecture, but its reach has now extended to most of the humanities and social sciences.

Now, I realize that there are as many different varieties of postmodernism as there are people claiming to be postmodernists. (This is undoubtedly appropriate for a movement which denies that there are fixed verities.) I do not want to paint with too broad a brush. The postmodern insight that norms, standards, and what passes for truth are made by people and shaped by culture should come as a welcome sign for teachers and scholars of communication, since it adds weight to "our" side of the age-old clash between rhetoric and philosophy, between Isocrates and Plato. And our critical faculties should be enhanced by the recognition that what passes for universal truth in a culture may serve rather to insulate the powerful from challenge. We will be more sensitive to the common communicative practice of defining one's own interest as if it were the public interest, mistaking division for unity.

But postmodernism can be carried too far. It is one thing to say that cultures make their own truths; it is quite another to say that there are no truths; and yet another to say that it is pointless to search for truths. It is one thing to say that knowledge may be linked to interest; another to say that it must be; and still another to say that there is thus no way to legitimate knowledge claims.

From the insight that meanings are made by people, we need not conclude that they are always shifting and unstable. From the recognition that "universal reason" may be a convenient fiction, we need not determine that striving after it is a pointless exercise.

It is these (to me) more extreme versions of postmodernism that undermine the public forum. Under their influence, there can be no such thing as common standards for discourse, no motive for collaborative problem-solving, no possibility of a transcendent rhetorical vision. Lyotard puts it most starkly in insisting that, with the withering away of common sense in postmodernity, "there cannot be a *sensus communis*" to which to appeal.

But without a public forum there can be no public communication, and without communication there can be no public. For communication is the social glue. In and through communication, people articulate the bonds holding them together and the visions moving them toward goals. Public talk creates and sustains community. The alternative is a new tribalism in which "the balkanization of knowledge" is not just a metaphor, in which Yugoslavia is a model for what society may become.

## II

Although I don't think we are on the precipice, I do think we have serious cause for concern. Just as the gradual depletion of the ozone layer threatens us with physical harm, the gradual erosion of the public sphere threatens our civic health. People are largely separated from politics, which they view as posturing rather than problem-solving. Despite the admonition of the authors of *The Good Society*, we view complex institutions in the same way that many of us view computers -- as "autonomous systems operating according to their own mysterious internal logic," rather than as instruments "amenable to citizen action and the influence of global public opinion." We cannot identify with a transcendent public interest so we resort instead to an adversarial struggle for self-interest, defined as rights. The struggle often is conducted through a contest of slogans, whether they be "family values," "the right to choose," or "the new world order."

Disconnecting the people from the process of collective decision making is an invitation to tyranny. If people are active but not deliberative, their only recourse is to reach decisions by amassing

force; let the strongest interest prevail. If they are inactive, the recourse is to trust the charismatic figure, the rider on the white horse who promises to cut through the logjam and by force of will to solve the problems that have stymied lesser mortals. Either way, courts despotism. It is indeed ironic that Americans would take these risks at just the time when so much of the world, repressed for so long, is having a first taste of democratic citizenship.

Perhaps I overreact. After all, doesn't our democratic process operate like an invisible hand to produce compromise in the face of competing interests? And doesn't our First Amendment assure freedom of expression and broadly protect individual rights?

But we would make a serious mistake to assume that these procedural norms are self-executing. Freedom of speech cannot withstand whatever interest is arrayed against it, unless we believe that the contest of ideas, even unpopular ideas, in the end will lead to collective wisdom and sound judgment. If we begin by denying the meaningfulness of these very ends, the First Amendment will soon be an empty shell. And as for democratic procedures, we need only look to history for examples of tyrants and dictators who gained power through democratic elections.

Academics may value "keeping the conversation going" as an end in itself, but most people regard that value as instrumental toward a goal such as truth, happiness, or wisdom. If the possibility of such an ultimate goal is denied at the outset, what is the point of playing the game? And if we don't play, how can we avoid balkanization of our society or tyranny in our politics?

Protection against these risks should be the special concern of the speech communication discipline. From our earliest days in ancient Greece, we were dedicated to empowering individuals to perform more effectively as citizens, so that the community might achieve *phronesis* -- practical wisdom in human affairs. We followed Aristotle in regarding rhetoric as an offshoot of politics and ethical studies. We justified the study of communication as vital to democracy. We still do.

Yet, with notable exceptions, we have had little to say either about the communication revolution that has transformed our culture or the erosion of the public sphere which seems to have been its byproduct. Our own collective discourse has dwelt instead on such matters as whether we are primarily scholars or teachers, how we should schedule conventions and allocate program slots among our units, and whether we should change the name of our association.

Too often we have tried to imitate the intellectual history of other disciplines rather than building on our own tradition and strength. We have regarded the teaching of basic communication skills as beneath us, except when we need to count student credit hours to justify our existence. Rather than teaching skills as "equipment for living" in the public sphere, too often we've focused more on their value in the search for a job. We have too often robbed public speaking of its concern for the public, de-emphasized the study of deliberative processes in interpersonal communication, and failed to understand how performance makes and sustains our culture. The area of our field which most directly bears on public affairs, the study of argumentation and debate, we too often have treated as an intellectual backwater of programs staffed by paraprofessionals and undeserving of our support. And our colleagues in this area have defined their own professional concerns with such insularity that they deprive the rest of us of their insight into the conduct of public controversy.

I probably have expressed too much alarm. As *Spectra* readers know, I've discovered this year that one of the few "perks" of the

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SCA presidency is the right to pontificate. Yet I think I am close enough to the mark that our discipline, perhaps most of all, should take notice.

### III

Paradoxically, preserving individual freedom requires collective effort, and -- in Dionne's words -- "individualism must be tempered by civic obligation." In this the communitarians are right. To use a mundane analogy, it is like the much derided category of "faculty service." Few like it, and it doesn't seem to count for much at merit review time. But without it the whole culture of academe, including the principle of academic freedom, could not survive. So we do it, not just because the Dean will hold it against us if we don't. We do it as an investment in the academic community whose protections allow us the professional freedom we prize.

The investments which academics make in their own governance, citizens must make in theirs. Fully cognizant of the insights of postmodernism, we nevertheless must work to revitalize the public sphere. Let me offer five touchstones for doing that.

First: We must welcome a more diverse participation than we ever have known. The day is past when race, gender, class, religion, or any other demographic variable can be allowed to deny anyone the chance to be involved in meaningful public discourse. Our history has been toward removing barriers to participation. At times, the rate of progress has been slow. In our own time, the pace of inclusiveness has increased, and it cannot be allowed to abate until all barriers to access have been dismantled.

We do this, most of all, because it is right and just. We also do it because all can gain from it. We all become aware of what we take for granted when our unstated assumptions are surfaced and questioned by someone else.

We've probably all had this experience. In my case, teaching American public address to international students has made me more aware of some of my own cultural biases, just as I perhaps have helped to sensitize others to the unintended affront caused by serving pork or shellfish at public dinners. If we gain at the individual level, how much more would our public dialogue be enriched by broad and diverse participation.

Besides, the needs we confront, the problems we face, are not so simple that anyone's contribution can be wasted. Ideas, insight, imagination, compassion -- these do not sort themselves out on any demographic variable. To exclude anyone from participation in the public sphere is to impoverish us all.

Second: With more diverse participation, public discourse changes. This happens not because of "political correctness" or any other artificial reason, but as a natural consequence of enlarging access to participation. We have in our lifetime a dramatic example of such transformative changes: Southern discourse since the civil rights acts of the 1960s. The same George Wallace who in 1963 stood in the schoolhouse door, in his last campaign actively sought black votes and won in large part because of them. Racial slurs and epithets once perfectly acceptable in polite society were suddenly inappropriate -- not because of censors or thought police but because African Americans were part of mainstream political discourse and no longer were denigrated as "the other."

This past summer, I heard a speaker contend that the involvement of women in the public sphere would not achieve the goals of feminism because the public sphere itself was a masculine creation.

Including women, the speaker said, would just co-opt them into a male role, sustaining a patriarchal culture. She derided this project as "add women and stir."

I disagree. If you really do "add women and stir," the stirring changes the mix you started with. Again we have clear evidence. The growing involvement of women in recent decades has brought once "private" issues into the public sphere, ranging from child care and pay equity to domestic violence and sexual harassment. These once were trivialized as "women's issues." No longer. We have far to go, of course. But the record to date, in my opinion, should convince feminists not to reject the ideal of the public sphere but, rather, to pursue it more vigorously.

In a provocative article, Nancy Fraser suggests that social equality is a prerequisite for these transformative changes. Inequality cannot simply be bracketed while people deliberate "as if" they were equal. This, however, is a chicken-and-egg issue. True, real social differences cannot just be set aside. But engaging the public forum is one of the most effective ways to overcome these differences and to achieve social change.

Third: Notwithstanding the emphasis on diversity, there are still common bonds and values which undergird the public forum. Here I part company with those postmodernists who argue that in principle there can be no such thing as common value, that it is "difference all the way down." I do not mean to deny the distinctiveness of individuals, groups, or cultures, but I do mean to insist that -- even in a postmodern public -- people "in fact share goals and values and are willing to work together to promote them." Achieving meaningful *diversity* is hard enough. But diversity carried to its limit means tribalism and balkanization. As two of our regional associations reminded us in the theme of their joint convention, we must both respect diversity and build unity. A postmodern public does not evade the tension between unity and diversity, but embraces it as a source of strength.

Having embraced *diversity*, however, can we even imagine the possibility of common bonds? Or, as Nancy Fraser puts the question, would people "share enough in the way of values, expressive norms, and, therefore, protocols of persuasion to lend their talk the quality of deliberations aimed at reaching agreement through giving reasons?" A good question. We've seen how tough it is, for instance, to find any common touchstone that can be understood and accepted as a premise for foreign policy, now that "anticommunism" no longer will do. And that is only one arena of discourse. Yet we are not without exemplars for the larger project.

In one of my favorite of his speeches, 30 years ago last summer, President Kennedy delivered the commencement address at American University. After urging with remarkable foresight that we must make the world safe for diversity, he went on to claim: "For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

At one level these statements are but platitudes. But they also suggest basic values of interdependence, stewardship, and mortality, which I hope could sustain discourse even across the lines of diversity and difference. And if it is hard to find such values and premises, we ought to accept the search as a challenge for our discipline, since among our goals we are dedicated to cultivating what Aristotle described as the faculty of discovering in the given case the available means of persuasion.

Fourth: Participants in the postmodern public are competent in

the art of deliberation. This very traditional practical art still has an important place. No less than other peoples at other times, we are confronted by the twin elements that define the rhetorical situation: having incomplete knowledge, and yet having to choose. Wanting to make discerning and wise choices, we make and scrutinize claims, deliberating about the issue through the give-and-take of discussion and debate.

The good news in the Kettering Foundation study of college students' political attitudes is that the skills of deliberation are the skills students need and want. Foundation president David Mathews wrote, "One implication of what students are saying is that the character of politics largely is determined by the character of the political dialogue. Politics may end in action, but it begins in conversation." Students reported that they needed better information about issues, understanding the full range of perspectives on an issue, being able to work together toward a common goal, better listening, and a sense that participation matters.

These are precisely the things we study and teach. Deliberative skill is first of all a matter of interpersonal communication -- involving empathy, listening, perspective-taking, self-monitoring, discourse analysis, conversational implicature, and so many other topics with which we are familiar. Deliberative skill is a matter of rhetoric -- analyzing a situation, deriving premises from audience beliefs and values, identifying the available means of persuasion and selecting and arranging them, achieving effectiveness in style and delivery. And deliberative skill is manifest in enacted performance, which may occur in public address, or in organizational settings, or in the mass media. Helping to understand, to practice, to criticize and to improve the art of deliberation is our special contribution to the vitality of the public sphere.

I sometimes hear it said that faith in critical deliberation is narrowly Western, or elitist, or patriarchal, a tool of hegemony and hardly a model for the marginalized or the oppressed. True, the more we learn about culture, the more we discover that what we thought were universal conventions may be culture-specific. There are differences in starting points for discourse, in the use of narrative, in what counts as evidence, in the role of consistency, and in many other variables as well. The postmodernist is right in urging us to cultivate and respect this diversity. The students interviewed for the Kettering Foundation also want "discussions that included a greater diversity of viewpoints and that respected divergent opinions." This desire, Mathews explains, is prompted not by any abstract commitment to tolerance but by the recognition that "they needed this diversity of opinion to understand issues in all their complexity."

Notice what is being said here. Welcoming diversity is not *noblesse oblige*; it is essential for understanding issues. On the other hand, recognizing difference is not an alternative to deliberation, but a starting point for it. Through deliberation is how we understand issues. For any individual or group to forego the art of deliberation within a revitalized public sphere, claiming that it serves interests other than their own, is to assure continued marginality -- a self-fulfilling prophecy. A healthy respect for differences is not achieved by ghettoizing individuals into hermetically sealed talk-worlds cut off from access to others. Rather, it is through engagement in the public sphere that difference can be recognized, accepted, and also drawn upon to make wise collective decisions.

Fifth and finally: A revitalized public sphere is found in many different places. There is no single sphere for which we should look; rather, we should find many discourse communities guided

by the ideal of the public forum. This touchstone follows the postmodernist rejection of monism while preserving the vitality of the public ideal.

We hope to find the public sphere in election campaigns and other events when an entire society deliberates about important issues. But not only there. It is also found in private associations, local school councils, community organizations, quality circles on the job, National Issues Forums and other discussion groups. It may also be found in dissident groups if they function, in Nancy Fraser's terms, as "subaltern counterpublics" rather than merely as lobbyists, protesters, or interest groups. And just as the public forum may be local, so too may it be global. Increasingly the boundaries of public discourse ignore the boundaries drawn on a map.

In situating the postmodern public, we should not be blind to the opportunities opened by new technology. For a variety of reasons, economic and otherwise, we are now witnessing the "de-massification" of mass media. "Narrowcasting" via cable television appears to be the wave of the future, increasing one's viewing choices and one's chance for access. Call-in talk shows already illustrate the possibilities.

Computer technology will make interactive mediated communication commonplace. We already know that electronic mail changes the nature of interpersonal communication. Last year, Presidential candidate Ross Perot spoke about the idea of an "electronic town meeting." While he was understandably short on specifics, I suspect that something like it will come to pass. I hope that it will increase the chances for true public deliberation.

Last Sunday's newspaper notes that in Silicon Valley, a local computer bulletin board is being installed, and that residents of another California city can hold conferences with public officials by computer. Referring to the revolution in communication technology, the director of the Center for Governmental Studies at the University of Southern California says, "People will be able to vote electronically, ... organize referendums and in general participate in politics more widely."

Cyberspace as the new public sphere? Well, it certainly would be postmodern -- valuing the *concept* of the public while disengaging it from any particular time or place. It is also not without risks, including the risk that "instant democracy" will mean a rush to judgment, subverting rather than strengthening the process of deliberation. We should be alert to the risks and mindful of the challenges. But the postmodern public should make technology its friend and use it to involve those who may be very distant in space or time. We should be far more sensitive to what the public *does* than to where it *is*.

At my first SCA convention, 25 years ago, President Douglas Ehninger spoke to the theme of "cultural re-orientation." He spoke at a time of worldwide unrest and turmoil. Now we face a cultural reorientation of a different sort, one which acknowledges the immense changes of the past generation while also trying to preserve an older ideal. We must recognize that the public is diverse and that diversity changes discourse. At the same time, we must reaffirm that common bonds hold a public together and that public discourse is deliberative. We must look for the public in far more places than we ever have before.

Abraham Lincoln observed in that Ottawa debate that "he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions." That says a lot about the importance of what we study. A revitalized commitment to the public forum will help to make that power a force for good. Let us be on with the task.