

## Marie Hochmuth Nichols, President of the National Communication Association, 1969

By Jane Blankenship, from *Review of Communication*, 4(1/2), 75-85.

The word “retrospective” seems more than it was in her nature to sanction. “All this stuff embarrasses me!” she wrote me once after a program in her honor. Her scholarship illuminated the past even as she moved our discipline in new directions. Not only her scholarship but her leadership was tested during a particularly turbulent period of Speech Communication Association/National Communication Association (SCA/NCA) organizational change and major social change. In 1976, the Association awarded her the “Distinguished Service Award,” its highest honor, and in 1995, no less than 17 years after her death, the Association named her Distinguished Scholar, posthumously. So, it is entirely fitting that this series of essays begin with Marie Nichols.



Her career spanned more than 30 years, when the discipline, still deeply rooted in the past, moved somewhat uneasily into the future, sparking vigorous and sometimes vitriolic debate about newer directions. Nichols, a child of the neo-Aristotelian tradition that dominated much 1940s thought, introduced the discipline to I. A. Richards and Kenneth Burke in the 1950s, and this extraordinary teacher developed courses dealing with Marshall McLuhan, the French existentialists, B. F. Skinner, and Kenneth Boulding, long before most. She also was the first woman to be elected to the Association presidency by a vote of the whole membership. (Four earlier women presidents—Henrietta Prentiss, Maud May Babcock, Elise Hahn, and Magdalene Kramer—were selected by committee.) Not only did Nichols help lead in the mid-20th century, she stood almost alone as a role model for the next generation of women who qualified to join the highest of scholarly discussions. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell observed, “No one can study rhetoric and public address without being influenced by her work as an editor, a theorist, and critic. She was a woman in whose steps we could hope to follow, and those were rare in those days” (SCA, 1983, transcribed audiotape of proceedings). In a recent telephone conversation (May 2004), Campbell also pointed to the importance of Nichols’ teaching home: “That she was a woman at a top-tier school made it possible for us to believe we might also aspire to that level.”

I explore three major leadership roles Mrs. Nichols enacted in our discipline:

- (1) President of the SCA (1969) and editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (QJS);
- (2) Scholar, whose work significantly impacted the discipline’s future critical thought; and
- (3) Teacher, whose influence extended well beyond her Illinois home campus.

### Editor and Association President

Although Nichols had served on a variety of Association committees and had chaired an interest group, her 1963 appointment to the editorship of the QJS marked a major milestone both on her path to the presidency and in the history of the Association, as the first woman editor in its 47-year history. Several features marked her tenure as editor (1963–1965): She clearly sustained “excellence and breadth in the articles she chose to publish,” “fostered, encouraged, and assisted with astonishing care and patience new contributors—young ones, but some older

ones too— seeking to make their way respectably into print” (Bryant, 1978, p. 4), and (3) she and her Editorial Board were also forward-looking by selecting some important pieces in newer areas. These include “Introduction to Cybernetics and Information Theory,” “Methodological Analysis in Communication Research,” “Linguistics as a Science,” “Stability in Meaning for Quantitative Terms,” “Meta-Analysis in Communication Research,” “Televising Courtroom Proceedings,” and the like. Such essays brought new substantive and methodological matters to our attention, pushed us to look beyond ourselves to see what other disciplines might be telling us, moved us beyond analysis to meta-analysis, and pushed us to examine the role of a newer medium as it interacts with a long studied setting.

She served during a particularly tumultuous period. The country was in turmoil, the academy in ferment, the NCA troubled both about its role in the larger society and within its own structure, asking necessary questions: What kind of an organization do we want to be? Primarily a scholarly organization? A professional one? How do we accommodate a membership that is changing—some groups leaving, such as Communication Disorders, others seeking recognition, such as Interpersonal, Organizational, and Inter-Cultural? How do we deal with a recombinant organization in significant financial need?

A preeminent scholar–teacher, she had a vision of what the Association could and should do to help shape the future. She thought often and deeply about the environment that we construct and by which we are constructed. Three themes played a major role in her view: (1) Permanence and change, or more particularly, permanence amidst change permeates our environment. We need to figure out ways to be forward-looking while honoring the worthwhile parts of our past. (2) We live in an environment of words as well as the air we breathe and the water we drink. We need to think more carefully about our language. Words are “terministic screens” that both select and deflect. They not only describe, they prescribe. (3) Means are ends in process. Public discussion can be passionate and intense without being irrational and uncivil. Among the ends towards which she was especially passionate were tolerance, understanding, justice, and cooperation. One needed a discourse commensurate with achieving those ends.

She was elected because she was well known as a major scholar–teacher. She was a person of extraordinary energy and eloquence. She could honor the past while looking forward. There were big problems to deal with, and she had the forthrightness and courage to begin facing up to them. In addition to being a rhetorician at a Big Ten University, she fit in with the one-every-10-years rule for electing women.

Any vice president focuses on the convention. As with her editorship, much of her concern focused on quality and on encouraging the young to participate more fully. To these ends she maintained and strengthened a plan that Richard Murphy, Donald Bryant, and she had previously developed for the Rhetoric and Public Address Interest Group, a competitive program session for new authors called the Debut Program. Other groups were encouraged to have such a session. To ensure increased quality and earlier planning for papers, she edited a book of abstracts of convention papers.

Two key terms seemed pivotal to Hochmuth Nichols’ Association leadership: “excellence” and “relevance.” Excellence was featured in her approach to convention program planning as vice president, and in her first Spectra message as president, entitled “The Search for Excellence” (1968). Relevance is featured in her “Convention Welcome” and in her presidential address, “The Tyranny of Relevance” (1970).

The year before the Nichols convention, in 1967, the NCA Administrative Committee and Legislative Assembly debated and rejected relocating the 1968 convention out of Chicago. Wherever the site, she clearly intended that the discipline engage the issues of the day in a very direct way. To that end she encouraged events that would facilitate such dialogue. That decision seemed even more compelling as the 1968 convention drew near, especially after that summer's Democratic Party's nominating convention in Chicago was marred by demonstrations, civil disorder, and police brutality. In the October 1968 Spectra, she wrote: In our planning, we have not neglected the traditional nor ... avoided the controversial. These are times in which that which is tried must be re-examined for its continuing worth in giving continuity and stability, and also times when the new must be re-examined for its possible worth. (p. 1)

Nichols' convention theme was "Cultural Re-Orientation," which she explained on the program's Welcome Page:

Aware of the swiftness of change within our society, the officers and committees have sought to prepare a program which manifests this awareness. Persons concerned with programs of communication as they relate to civil rights, civil disorders, and the underprivileged ... Workshops and regular programs have been directed by the guiding principle of social relevance. (p. 1)

Some programs centered on revising classroom instruction ("Oral Communication, Training, and the Disadvantaged"; "Reorienting Undergraduate Speech Instruction to Cultural Needs"). Some focused on free speech and protest ("American Issues: Dissent or Disagreement"; "The Rhetorical Perspective for a Response to Protest"; "Rhetoric of Groups as a Medium of Change"). Some dealt with the role of media ("Media and Civil Rights, Mass Media and Civil Disorders"). One centered on "The Social Relevance of Doctoral Dissertations." To further enact her theme, she reinstated the presidential address as a regular part of the convention program; and the president, Douglas Ehninger, titled his speech "Of Relevance, Relatedness, and Reorientation" (Ehninger, 1969). Among the questions he asked were: "Should we, this, our professional organization, announce a position on public issues? What should be our stance socially and politically? What are our obligations in those situations where freedom of speech or of assembly appear to have been restricted?" (Ehninger, p. 4)

The Association President has a variety of duties, only some of them managerial. Nichols forwarded agendas and presided over meetings; but largely the presidency is a "bully pulpit." At the outset of her presidential address, Nichols recalled the 1968 presidential speech delivered by Douglas Ehninger, noting that he gave priority to the problem of making speech education socially relevant:

[T]eachers of speech are faced by a challenge to give our work at all levels and in all areas a new measure of social relevance; to search out what we professed experts, in the processes of education, can do to facilitate education among people and between factions; to replace divisiveness and war with consubstantiality and peace; to study not only to make ideas safe for people, but how to make people safe for ideas. (Ehninger, p. 9)

She made her own position clear: "With almost none of that could anyone disagree." She, too, wanted to address the issue of relevance, but to focus on "The Tyranny of Relevance."

In this speech, she makes five claims:

First, a central focus of our discipline is the examination of the way words and their meanings come to construct our lives, sometimes "unobtrusive words with uncertain meanings" (Nichols, p. 1)

Second, one word in particular, “relevance,” when used as an all-purpose word, should be singled out for deeper inspection because it seemed to be “gnawing at the roots of the educational structure.” “Relevance,” she argued, had “taken on more sinister aspects allowing it to become a bullying slogan, allied with power, designed to stop thought, as slogans frequently do” (p. 9).

Third, debate and discussion, long important ways of settling arguments, had been superseded by acts of physical violence. The academy, as a “place of words, was being targeted as the institutional center of violence” (p. 1). As one piece of evidence, she cited a dissident: The central instrument of violence in American culture is not physical violence. ... It is the word. We are violent to each other in almost no other way, and therefore the central institutions of violence in America are those that deal with the word and the killing abstraction. ... The university may be the central instrument of violence in America. (p. 1)

Fourth, change is needed, but it should not be brought about by violence. According to Hochmuth Nichols:

No one doubts that the educational system needs reform to meet the exigencies of changing times, but that effective change can be brought about by turmoil and abdication to the pressure of a slogan, may well be doubted. (p. 9)

Fifth, toward the end of her speech, her last claim was made in defense of the Association. She challenges claims that the 1968 convention and the discipline were irrelevant: “How accurate was that claim when one looked closely at the last year or so?” “Whose ideology should guide us in our judgment of what is relevant and what is not?” She asked: “What is so irrelevant about professional people getting together either to learn or to exchange views ... on the ethics of speechmaking ... on modes of communicating with Blacks, on the relationship between business and the disadvantaged?” (p. 10).

The speech, reprinted in *Spectra* (February 1970), surely was one of the most controversial presidential addresses in NCA’s history. Some, perhaps many, in the audience came ready to do battle over nothing less than the future role of the academy in the larger social scene. Hochmuth Nichols, an establishment figure, was known to speak very directly and with considerable passion. Some people came to walk out of her speech. One past president made a public point by leaving during the speech. People left the room sharply divided over what they had just heard. The name-calling was harsh and left little middle ground. People were either for or against the message. One senior member of the discipline, now deceased, reportedly called her a “troglydite.” Dictionary definitions of this term range from “caveman” to “one who lives in the past.” Another well-known scholar, who heard this speech as a young man, called the address “a case that needed to be made” and called her “a prophet who spoke the unpopular truth.”

Raising an alarm about any contemporary “god term” is a tricky matter, and taking on the multi-faceted god term, “relevance,” in troubled times proved to be no less difficult. Her presidential successor (Bryant, 1978) pointed to the really courageous center of what she tried to do: “She dared to examine in public, rationally, though hardly without passion, one of the slogans driving the times with an hysterical frenzy that made genuine dialog difficult” (p. 4).

At the center of Hochmuth Nichols’ lifelong study was the examination of the way words and their meanings come to construct our lives. In a time of extraordinary strain and challenge, she focused our attention on a central term of the times and the elasticity of meanings surrounding

it. Terms have implications, and she asked us to examine where those implications might lead us. Forward-looking as usual, she asked that we move beyond the term as a too-ready slogan and to approach it with the due seriousness of the academy.

## Scholar

Professor Nichols' scholarship has had a major impact on the discipline, and ultimately on the future of critical thought. Any retrospective about Marie Nichols needs to acknowledge the preeminence and breadth of her scholarship. Her work includes a series of what Chesebro terms "scholarly documents" that had a powerful impact in the 1940s to 1960s, and still to this day, including *American Speeches* edited with Wayland Maxfield Parrish (Hochmuth, 1954), and *The History and Criticism of American Public Address, III* (edited solely by Nichols, then Hochmuth, in 1955). Further, her vision of the future proved extremely important. Essays on Kenneth Burke (Hochmuth, 1952) and I. A. Richards (Hochmuth, 1958), and her book *Rhetoric and Criticism* (Nichols, 1963) opened up the discipline to new directions that were highly significant for a number of groups. Lastly, she contributed what Richard Enos (1985) has termed her "reflective essays," such as "When You Set Out for Ithaca" (1977) and her speech "Rhetoric in a Time of Pessimism" (1973). Throughout her work, Nichols was clear about her rationales and often talked about her critical decisions.

To suggest that Nichols' body of rhetorical criticism and theory was based on a narrow neo-Aristotelian, let alone a slavishly followed narrow Aristotelian prescription, is not easily justified by a careful and extensive reading of her work. I do not propose to restate the essentials of Aristotelian criticism nor recall the challenges. There are ample recountings of the sometimes testy challenges. As Patton (2001) has observed, "While she has been frequently held up as an exemplar of the neo-classicist or traditional method of rhetorical criticism, such a label seems far too limiting for the kinds of insights that she generated in her theorizing and critical practice" (p. 133).

Much of the critique of Nichols' work has, thus far, focused on two pieces, her essay on Lincoln's "First Inaugural Address" (Hochmuth, 1954), and her essay "The Criticism of Rhetoric" (Hochmuth, 1955). The former essay is tied too closely to the Parrish essay which precedes it and in the latter it is useful to recall that her lead essay in Volume III of *History and Criticism* was published some nine years after the first two volumes edited by William Norwood Brigrance. Indeed, the Brigrance volumes were published two years before Nichols received her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. However, all three volumes are sometimes treated as if they were identical in perspective.

To suggest as some do that Nichols' two pieces are starkly neo-Aristotelian and that they are works of criticism rather than theory seem too simple a characterization. My point here is not to open old quarrels and continued critiques of neo-Aristotelianism's narrow instrumental focus and the like. To say that the remaining work of more than 30 years is yet to be seriously mined in any detail is to do a disservice not only to Nichols, but also to those who might well profit from reading the complete corpus.

In describing the "critical stodginess" that had set in "over the rhetorical landscape" and the discontent during the 1950s, Richard Gregg (1985) recalls a special 1957 issue of *Western Speech*. He notes the clear concern Nichols' contribution to the issue had for the limitations of the "solidly established conventional aspects of the Aristotelian tradition, with stress upon the functional and dynamic character of rhetoric" (Gregg, 1985, p. 47).

Gregg offers additional evidence by recalling her view:

Rhetoric as technique designed to secure effects, not rhetoric as an art sustained in and through dialectic, has been our concern, and our lack of equipment to deal with rhetoric in its philosophical aspects has manifested itself in our criticism. The Aristotelian rationale has, of course, made easy the practice of seizing upon the mechanical aspects of the lore. (Gregg, quoting Nichols, p. 47)

Nichols freely admits to a major development in her own work in *Rhetoric and Criticism* (1963): I had assumed that since 1935 I had something to do with communication but the first of Burke's books, encountered some 10 years later, set me to wondering. I suppose all of us get accustomed to look at what we are doing in a certain way and after a while have a kind of 'trained incapacity' for looking at things in any other way. (p. 81)

Moreover, Nichols seemed most at home characterizing her attitude as the "humane approach," and she is clear about what that characterization does not mean:

In stating the case for the humane approach to rhetoric, I hope I shall not be interpreted as making a plea for a return to the classics. Classicism merely is indoctrinated humanism. As Perry has pointed out, it is no necessary part of humanism. Where else could the Renaissance have turned for light except the Greeks and Romans? The world at that time was a limited world, and the past a limited past.... The humane approach to rhetoric does not mean burying one's self in 4th Century Athens or 1st Century Rome. ... The real spirit of the humane approach is, I think, in the words of Kenneth Burke: "Use all there is to use." (p. 18)

By the 1960s younger critics were suspicious that contemporary criticism had been, among other things, tinged with social conservatism, not merely with a surfeit of critical methods, but also with a limited repertoire of communication situations examined. Amidst a growing demand for greater diversity, she also turned her attention to the ever-expanding breadth of the communication discipline, and the blossoming of new approaches. It was also during that period that she began to speak out about the lack of recognition that the work of younger women in the Association had received and the implications for them as well as the whole discipline. The Wingspread Conference on the future of rhetorical studies announced that participants would be nominated by their departments or SCA members.

When no women were selected, breaking her silence on such matters, Nichols wrote in her review of the conference report:

More than 40 males presented their wisdom about rhetoric for the '70s and beyond. This reviewer, in something of a huff, would like to ask the question: Would the inclusion of four or five females have greatly lowered the quality of the discussions? Such a distribution would probably have been more in line with the realities of the present. (1972, p. 96)

Still, it was a time when a male colleague could and did refer publicly to her as "our menopausal scholar." And the very issue of *Spectra* carrying her presidential photo on the front page titled the call for papers for the 1969 convention program: "One Man—One Paper (and women too)." In the 1970s (by now fighting the first of two bouts with cancer), she returned to several of her favorite topics: "Rhetoric and Style" (1971) and "Rhetoric and the Humane Tradition," subtitled, "A Tradition in Transition" (1974). Her husband, Alan G. Nichols, Professor Emeritus, University of Southern California, died in 1973.

In addition to her own scholarship, she continued to assess the general state of rhetorical studies and the matter of who was selected to participate in discussions of the future of rhetorical studies. In 1974 she taught a seminar at ECA entitled "Rhetoric in a Time of Pessimism." That was a time of debunking much of the humane tradition. Rudy's Red Wagon

(1973) was in vogue. For Nichols, such books were in no way commensurate with the times. The “exercise of reason was called a hang-up,” and one writer conducted an “autopsy” of the rhetorical tradition.

In that seminar, she recalled convention papers on “The Rhetoric of the Parking Meter,” “Pornography as the Paradigm for Rhetoric,” and “The Rhetoric of the Bagel and White Bread.” Agreeing that the subject should be expanded, she asked: “Need its identity be lost? And need truth be called subjectivity?”

A second major concern was with the growing treatment of communication as a process and the proliferation of and attention to models. She was concerned with neglect of purpose and ends. A third concern was the continuing appropriation of symbols from many fields, such as the rhetoric of ballet, of architecture, and so on. She asked, “By what rights do we ‘poach’ on other people’s fields especially when we neglect our central focus, verbal symbols?” More than one department, including major ones, was asked by its administration, “What do you do that no one else on our campus does?” The times were nervous and such a question may lie just below the surface of academic life or death. The point here is less to recount some of the particularly edgy speech, but to illustrate how directly and passionately Nichols pushed us to ask central questions.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1983) characterized her scholarly sphere this way: “Some of us command an encyclical; some of us command a single rhetorical theorist; some of us command a rhetorical period. Marie Hochmuth Nichols commanded the tradition.”

## **Teacher**

For most of her career, Professor Nichols taught at the University of Illinois, Urbana. With Karl Wallace, Richard Murphy, and other serious scholars, she helped speech communication in its formative years “to grow from a collection of teachers of public speaking into a substantial discipline concerned with the full range of scientific and philosophical inquiry” (Nebergall & Wenzel, 1976, p. viii). By “example as well as precept, [they] inspired their students with a spirit of scholarship that we and they have called ‘The Illinois Tradition.’” A tradition, here, “must be compounded of a body of knowledge and experience, a motivating spirit, and a certain historical continuity” (1976). Its central tenets were that rhetoric in its most useful sense embraces the whole rationale of influential discourse; that rhetoric is an essential dimension of human social action; and that the study of rhetorical theory, practice, and criticism has an important place in liberal education” (1976, p. viii).

Wayne Brockriede (1976) wrote of those who were part of that tradition as graduate students: [T]o be true to the liberalizing education we received, we had no choice but to pursue ideas where they led us, to make judgments as good as we could make, and to make them after the most rigorous research, thinking, and arguing we could muster. The legacy they leave us is not the positions they have taken in the course of their own productive careers, but rather the tradition of taking scholarship seriously, of grappling with ideas rigorously, of giving as much of self to students as they could, and of all the other aspects of the teacher–scholar that connote a humane but hardheaded way of dealing with people and with ideas. (p. xiii)

Nichols was a teacher who influenced generations of graduate students inside and outside classrooms. Each of us can recall our individual gifts from this extraordinary teacher, for the gift of her time when she had none for herself, her concern that we be ourselves while honoring the more general commitment to love of letters, the gift of her affection for each of us uniquely, when it embraced so many of us simultaneously.

Roger Nebergall and Joseph Wenzel (1976) put it this way:

More than any other faculty member, Mrs. Nichols came to be loved for giving of herself to students. She [was] always available to talk to a student or a colleague, most often about that person's concerns, but sometimes too about her own current work. As graduate students we all learned that if one wanted a break from routine or a stimulating half-hour of conversation, one could always count on Marie Nichols to be caught up with some new idea and anxious to talk about it. No one can say how much the morale of a generation of graduate students came to depend on those occasions when we could entice her to leave the office and join a group for coffee and talk. No doubt we all came to appreciate, and feel a twinge of conscience about the magnitude of her gift of those hours. For we saw the lights burning in her office every evening and nearly every weekend, as she did the work that had been put aside for us during the day. (p. xii)

Four fundamental beliefs underpinned her teaching philosophy: (1) belief in enduring values; (2) belief in rational public debate; (3) belief that clear and elegant language will elevate lives; and (4) belief in the inextricable relationship between rhetorical study and the humane tradition (Blankenship, 1986).

Not only in her formal writings did she teach; as many of us recall, she maintained a voluminous correspondence. What had we thought of Solzhenitsin's speech at Harvard? Had we read Adler's new book or the latest issue of *The Chronicle*? Had we learned anything new at one meeting or another? I suspect she off-handedly provided more bibliography items and other leads than most people do in a lifetime of formal lectures.

This retrospective has focused on Marie Hochmuth Nichols largely as Association leader and eminent scholar. Above all, she was a remarkable teacher both at large and in her own classrooms at Illinois. Here, we have only begun that part of the discussion. An earlier piece, "The Song of the Open Road" (Blankenship, 1986) details some of what Professor Nichols meant to those who were lucky enough to share those classrooms<sup>1</sup> with her. Above all, she took us seriously, and that is a great gift, especially to those just starting out on the Road to Ithaka.

## Note

[1]As noted in Patton (2001), Nichols' "unpublished lecture notes, class materials, and personal papers [were] donated to the author [Patton] and to the Library at the University of Illinois, Urbana" (p. 139, note 17). In addition, some of the material above is contained in an NCA weblink draft about its women presidents.

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Jane Blankenship is Professor Emeritus of Communication at the University of Massachusetts. Correspondence to: [blankenship@comm.umass.edu](mailto:blankenship@comm.umass.edu).