

Henrietta Prentiss, President of the National Communication Association, 1932

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This special section of *Review of Communication (ROC)* invites us to reconsider “an historical event, scholar, or issue important to the contemporary study of communication” (Chesebro, 2004, p. 4). In the first issue of *ROC*, Hauser (2001) sought to revive the dialogue about philosophy and rhetoric by focusing on the scholarly contributions of Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. In the April 2004 issue of *ROC*, Blankenship (2004, p. 75) surveyed the scholarship contributions of Marie Hochmuth Nichols to demonstrate that her “scholarship illuminated the past even as she moved our discipline in new directions.” Both Hauser and Blankenship were able to turn immediately to the unique characteristics of the subject of their biographies, focusing ultimately on the intellectual history in which each of their subjects participated. I think it would be inappropriate for me to do that as we examine the contributions of Henrietta Prentiss, President of the National Communication Association in 1932.



An Exploration in a Study of a Special Kind of Biography

In this retrospective, I will examine—in detail—the contributions of Henrietta Prentiss. However, I want to temporarily postpone that examination. I believe that I must depart from the kinds of arguments employed by Hauser and Blankenship. Indeed, if we are to understand the contributions of Prentiss, I would argue that necessarily we must employ an alternative mode of analysis.

At a point of departure here, we can initially note that all reconstructions of the scholarly contributions of historical figures typically employ the biographical form, because it is a form that normally allows a biographer to isolate the unique and exceptional contributions of past agents. These constructions are highly selective, designed to achieve a specific end, and involve the use of both logical and emotional appeals. In all, these biographic forms are inherently rhetorical, and the authors of these biographies can appropriately be viewed, at least, as persuaders.

However, the type of rhetoric involved in the construction of a biographical form can vary tremendously. For example, Bytwerk (1993, p. 248) has argued that Ronald Reagan’s life could be cast as a “rhetorical career” because Reagan’s life could be characterized as a series of speeches over some 30 years from 1957 to 1988. In an alternative view, Sillars (1993, p. 496) has argued that Clarence Darrow’s life could be described as a “rhetorical biography,” because “Darrow’s life as a communicator of considerable skill” could be emphasized. If we are to understand the life and contributions of Henrietta Prentiss, we must necessarily employ yet another conception of the biography. Rather than merely feature her unique characteristics as a person, we must also understand the historical context in which she existed, recognizing that her contributions are intimately tied to the circumstances in which she

functioned, circumstances that no longer exist today in contemporary professional communication associations. This conception of a biography has been aptly characterized by Taylor (2002, p. 33) as the “politics of biography.” As a basic premise, Taylor has argued that “modernist biography is often frustrated in the attempt to depict subjects as unique and coherent individuals” (p. 33). In contrast, he has maintained that some biographies are more appropriately understood as “shaped by intertextuality, in which their subjects continually recede before a conflicting documentary record of reminiscences, interrogation, and trail transcripts, and popular culture images” (p. 33).

The First 20 Years of the History of the Discipline of Communication— An Era Unlike Any Other

Henrietta Prentiss, especially as President of the National Communication Association (NCA) in 1932, must be understood within the very special, if not unique, circumstances defining the discipline of communication in the early 1930s. A host of unique circumstances might be extracted from this era. Arnold (1959) has offered the most powerful portrait of this era, a characterization that provides a placement and definition of the situation faced by Henrietta Prentiss.

In terms of professional communication associations, it should be noted that Prentiss served as President of NCA some 23 years after the first professional communication association was created, and she served some 17 years after NCA itself was formed. Arnold (1959, p. 4) has reported that in 1916, the first observations on the “art of oral composition” were first being offered, and one of the “first convention papers on effective speech organization” was given “at the 1916 meeting of the Eastern Public Speaking Conference”. And at the same meeting, Mary Yost of Vassar College read a paper contending that argument is a social, not a purely logical, process. And, during the 1920s, Arnold reported:

For whatever reason, those interested in the psychology of speaking were chiefly occupied in arguing the relative values of Jamesian, behavioristic, and Gestalt hypothesis during the 1920s. W. E. Utterback was probably right when he called these efforts to interpret all rhetorical activity according to this or that psychological system, “largely misdirected.” (p. 4)

Regardless of these early efforts, what is particularly noteworthy is that Prentiss assumed the presidency of NCA at a time when the discipline had yet to develop any enduring and significant framework for describing, interpreting, and evaluating communication. Indeed, Arnold has maintained that the discipline of communication could not even be said to exist until some six year after Prentiss served as President of NCA:

I think we may say that, by 1938, the rediscovery of rhetoric as the art of adapting *formal* discourse to the requirements of special situations was virtually complete, insofar as oral discourse was concerned. But it was not until the thirties that a search began for some kind of rhetoric of *informal* discourse—the speech of conference and purposive conversation. (p. 6)

Arnold concluded:

I am inclined to divide our twentieth-century developments in the study of rhetoric into two broad periods. I have been discussing a period of rediscovery and explication, running from the beginning of the century to about 1938. Since 1938, I think we have been in what I would describe as a period of intensive scrutiny of the rediscovered doctrines. (p. 6)

In all, what is particularly striking about this historical sketch is that Prentiss served as President of NCA when the discipline itself was in the process of rediscovering its most basic premises about what communication was, and following her presidency, the discipline itself was to expand its focus dramatically—perhaps undergoing its most radical transformation in the last 100 years—from the study of formal to informal communication. In this sense, while I do not want to overstate the case, it seems minimally true that Prentiss truly served as President of NCA during its most revolutionary transition in its object of study, its methods of analysis, and its role as an academic discipline. Few, if any, guidelines exist for serving as president of NCA during this period. Accordingly, an exploration of Prentiss as an individual becomes particularly powerful.

Henrietta Prentiss—Fashioning Understandings and a Sense of Change from the Personal

Henrietta Prentiss was born in 1876 to a New England father and a New York mother. Although little information can be documented about her early life, she had at least one sibling, a brother, Arthur Morgan Prentiss. She never married, and was survived only by her brother at the time of her death, May 14, 19. Records indicate that Prentiss spent the majority of her life in the northeast.

Prentiss graduated from Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts and subsequently took a job teaching speech at the Bloomburg Normal School in Pennsylvania. Sometime before 1907, Prentiss left Massachusetts for Iowa City to begin graduate work at the University of Iowa. She majored in zoology, minored in botany, and earned a Master's degree in 1907. The title of her Master's thesis was "A discussion of the more recent theories of heredity."

The first position Prentiss took after her graduate degree was at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York, where she taught biology. In 1908 she accepted a position in the Biology Department at Hunter College where she spent the remainder of her professional life as a faculty member. While at Hunter, Prentiss became involved in the college honor system, and for years fought any attempt to abolish the system. She was one of two faculty members to sit on the honor board of the college, the group that determined if students violated any part of the honor code.

Prentiss as Teacher and Scholar

In 1913, five years after coming to Hunter College as a biology professor, Prentiss began teaching speech. It was, in fact, the discipline of speech, especially the training of the voice and instituting high standards in both speech and the teaching of speech, that became the defining area, indeed the passion of her academic career. Prentiss viewed speech as a unique, burgeoning young discipline; special at least in part because both the scientific and aesthetic perspectives were important to it. She frequently discussed her concept of the field and the teaching of speech in her writings. The following excerpts from a 1928 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article entitled "Our speech standards" are an example:

Having passed through the period of pseudo-art commonly called elocution (although elocution has had its great artists and its fine expression as well as its quacks and its quackery), we are now entering upon a period of self-justification in which we would prove ourselves more scientific than the scientists, more factual than the historians, more logical than the mathematicians. Fortunately, most of us in our hearts own such allegiances to Art and Skill that I believe our teaching will never become purely academic. (p. 189)

And later, she discussed the beauty of the spoken word:

Phoneticians may laugh at the idea of one sound having more beauty than another, and I agree that difference in the relative beauty of whispered sounds is negligible, but once consider articulate sounds in relation to voice, and not only does ease of production assume importance, but beauty becomes a vital factor also. (p. 194)

Several years after beginning to teach speech, Prentiss became the Head of the Department of Speech at Hunter. A student at Hunter from 1933–1936, Marjorie Dycke recalls that the department, under Henrietta Prentiss, included aspects of the field such as public speaking, speech correction, speech pathology, discussion, debate, oral interpretation, and dramatics. In addition, she recalls that Professor Prentiss was often referred to by the students as “Hendy” and was a dignified, pleasant, and a very approachable lady (Dycke, personal communication, April 11, 1999).

Prentiss wrote and lectured throughout her career on teaching speech, training the refined voice, and developing standards upon which to evaluate speech. In one of her early publications, the 1928 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article, there is ample evidence of the ways in which her training in biology guided her perspective or approach to her new discipline, speech. In that article, she wrote:

We have superimposed on each other in our jaws and throats, that antipathetic functions of speech and of snatching tearing, holding and gulping. In the brute of man, speech had much of brute noise. With the progress of civilization, we are getting speech out of the throat, encouraging the making of sounds as far forward as possible, keeping the mass of the tongue away from the larynx, that the vocal chords may not be impeded in their vibration; relaxing the muscles of feeding that the more delicate muscles of voice may play unhampered and unexhausted. (p. 193)

While an emphasis on the scientific aspects of phonetics was clear in her writing, she balanced the scientific with a belief that speech was also an art form. In an eloquent 1926 letter to the editor of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech Education*, Prentiss suggested that:

Those of us who are very hopeful that the creative faculties shall not be neglected for the purely scientific and analytical, find comfort in the fact Iowa is accepting creative work for advanced degrees, and that Yale has founded a dramatic school. Those of us who feel that speech must be subjected to the laboratory test and come out pure science, rejoice in the spread of laboratory methods in our universities. (p. 69)

Thus, convinced that speech was both an art and a science, Prentiss frequently wrote about the multiple dimensions of speech. For example in a 1925 book chapter entitled “The training of the voice” she outlined the complexity of the spoken word:

We are justified in demanding of our students:

1. The voice social; radiation of voice.
2. The voice pleasant; modulation of voice.
3. The voice animated; eagerness of voice.
4. The voice clear; support of voice.
5. The voice resonant; amplification of voice. (p. 67)

Throughout her years at Hunter, Prentiss focused on two issues: better training for prospective teachers of speech and higher academic standards in speech departments. She fervently believed that refined speech was an integral part of a student's education and that well-trained instructors were essential. Her conference presentations were frequently on these subjects. In a *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article entitled "Speech problems at Hunter College," Prentiss (1930) expressed these sentiments:

It is a sorry experience for anyone to find himself in an economic or a social environment where good speech is expected and to be unable to swing into line without awkwardness or self consciousness. Here lies the joint responsibility of the school, as an educator and an employer. The school must teach its children to speak well and it must demand of its teachers good speech. (p. 473)

Much of her scholarly writing dealt with the problems caused by teachers who were inadequately prepared or lacked the knowledge to teach speech effectively. In the same 1930 article she wrote, "The voice is a most delicately directed function, its capacity for injury from ignorant direction appalling. The teacher whose only technique is to say 'louder, please,' and 'louder' or 'don't run your words together' is a menace" (p. 475). And from a 1932 speech, presented at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English:

In the field of utterance there is more danger of developing snobbishness than in almost any other field of education. Ought we not teach our young people to respect differences? ... The essential thing is that she (the student) has something to say and that she said it unafraid of pronunciation. Is that not a great deal better than what you do when you dodge the right word to express your thought because you are not sure whether the stress is one of the first or the second syllable? We know, many a child has done this and many a teacher has been responsible because his teaching lacked a sense of proportion. (p. 191)

Prentiss as an Active Member of the Professional Communication Association and Beyond
Prentiss was an active member of disciplinary associations throughout her career. In addition to her service in speech organizations, she was a founding member of the Linguistic Society of America and remained active in the organization until her retirement. She was also a part of the National Council of Teachers of English, but became an active participant in the group that broke from the English Council to form the National Association of Teachers of Speech. The constitution for the new group was drafted in 1932 and Prentiss became its president. She was the first woman to serve as President of what is now the National Communication Association. In 1932, when Prentiss became President of the National Association of Teachers of Speech, the United States was in the midst of economic depression. Despite obvious financial constraints of association members, Prentiss was determined that the national convention, which was to take place in Los Angeles, be held. In her 1932 "Message from the President" she wrote:

Certainly we are all urged to be cheerful, to be optimistic, and to be extravagant. I can think of nothing more cheerful, more optimistic, or more extravagant, than to believe that the convention ought to be held this year and to hope that a large majority of members of The National Association of Teachers of Speech will foregather in Los Angeles at Christmastime. As our faith, so shall it be unto us. (p. 515)

Later in the message, she made the case for members to attend despite the difficulties it may cause:

Knowing that attendance at our convention this year will mean sacrifice, I nevertheless urge you to come, determined to give and gain courage through comradeship, to acquire wisdom through discussion, to seek vision through new experiences and to find compensation in high thinking for the plain living that may be necessitated by your trip to Los Angeles. (p. 515)

Following her year as President, Prentiss remained an active member of the association for the remainder of her life. Although continuing as Chair of Hunter's Speech Department, she became ill sometime after 1932. Following what was described in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* as an absence of "some time," she returned to her duties at Hunter early in 1934. Little else is known about the rest of Prentiss' life other than she retired from her position at Hunter College in June 1939 and died 11 months later on May 14, 1940.

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Judith S. Trent is Professor in the Department of Communication, University of Cincinnati.
Correspondence to: Department of Communication, University of Cincinnati
615 Teachers College
Cincinnati, OH 45221, USA.

Professor Trent was President of the National Communication Association in 1997. E-mail: judith.trent@uc.edu