



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 10: Conversation with American Council of Learned Societies President
Joy Connolly

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Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Joy Connolly

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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Welcome to *Communication Matters*. Today I'm chatting with Dr. Joy Connolly who is the president of the American Council of Learned Societies or ACLS. It's a non-profit federation of about 75 scholarly organizations including NCA. The mission of ACLS is the advancement of humanistic studies in all fields of learning in the humanities and the social sciences and the maintenance and strengthening of relations among the national societies like NCA devoted to such studies. On today's episode, Dr. Connolly will speak about ACLS and some recent ACLS initiatives centered on diversity, equity and inclusion. But before we begin, a little bit of background about Dr. Connolly.

Joy Connolly is a distinguished professor of classics at the Graduate Center at The City University of New York and beginning in 2016, Dr. Connolly served as the provost and senior vice president of the Graduate Center and later served as its interim president before joining



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ACLS. At the Graduate Center, Dr. Connolly increased the number of master's programs and established the Publix Lab, an initiative supported by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation that is focused on transforming doctoral education in the humanities through fellowships related to public scholarship and other means. Dr. Connolly researches Greek and Roman literature and political thought and is the author of two books, one of which is a personal favorite of mine, *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome*. She's also the author of more than 70 articles, book reviews and essays. Hi, Joy and welcome to *Communication Matters*. Thanks for being with us.

Joy Connolly:

Trevor, thank you so much for having me. I'm happy to talk to you and your people.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Before we dive into a discussion about ACLS though, I'd like to talk about how you are some of our people specifically highlighting some of your research, your most recent work, *The Life of Roman Republicanism*—I should say book length work—blends the study of political theory and classical studies and I think many communication scholars would be interested in your discussion of the concept of the republic in the book. You make the case that Roman ideas are still relevant to challenging problems that we face in our democracy today such as inequality, corruption and civil distrust. Civil distrust seems to be particularly pressing in these troubling times of COVID-19. So, I'm wondering how do you think the Romans help us understand these important public issues?

Joy Connolly:

It's a great question, Trevor, and I want to take one step back to say that at a point in my doctoral career when I was thinking about what then in the mid-90s felt like very much a choice between focusing on literature and texts on one hand and focusing on society on the other, it seemed to me the study of communication and rhetoric was the perfect solution for me going forward if I really wanted to understand important issues, important in Roman society, in ancient Mediterranean society and important now. And that's held true for more years than I at this point want to admit. But in the life of Roman republicanism, I try to tackle mostly Cicero's notion of what a republic is although my reading of Cicero is certainly informed by poets and historians of his generation and his century. But Cicero's one of our best handles on Roman thinking about what a republic is because, of course, as people in communication know, he was a practicing politician as well as a brilliant writer.

And two ideas I think would be of most interest to communications scholars and students and one is that the republic is a state of conflict. It's not a static, uniform—it's not Plato's republic. It



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really is a lived dynamic and often just on the verge of tilting into violence kind of community and what stops that tilt into violence, into physical violence is the channeling of violent impulses and disagreements especially over property ownership and the haves and have-nots into talk. So, that leads into the second big concept that I think would be of interest to communication scholars but not just them, hopefully, readers and thinkers and citizens all around us and that's the notion of the importance of accountability and clear communication connected to accountability for public servants but also for citizens themselves. So, here for me, this just goes into all avenues of work connected to education and research in the higher education realm in which I've worked all my life because if we can't communicate our knowledge whether it's—thinking of COVID—how a cell works, how a virus works, all the way to understanding the consequences of social distancing and the way we're communicating differently, if we don't think about those things, we're not going to be able to make good decisions as citizens of a republic.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. That's fascinating and I think certainly it speaks to a lot of the work that many folks in communication are concerned with. We've had some recent podcasts, for example, talking about the importance of reforming democracy, encouraging more talk as you say and bridging some of these gaps in civil distrust. So, I think that's really important. In addition to all of this fascinating work on Cicero and the classics, you're also the president of ACLS and you've been around since early July of 2019. It's a tough time to begin your tenure as president of ACLS. I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what ACLS is about and what your tenure thus far has shown you about the potentials of ACLS and learned in societies in general.

Joy Connolly:

For me, it feels really very much of a piece because for all the years that I've spent as an academic thinking about what it is to be a citizen in a complex and dynamic and changing and violent and unpredictable world, right now higher education is entering very choppy waters of uncertainty indeed and there's going to be a lot of talk, a lot of competition for support I think of the landscape of higher education as a landscape of competitive fragmentation. And this is really what's exciting about being at ACLS because we're an umbrella organization, we're a connective organization and where I predict we're going to try to use that history and that special position of being a connector is in a few ways. And we're best known for our fellowship programs for sure especially over the last 20 years and we're thinking now very seriously and planning for a quick turn of focus of our fellowship programs to focus on those who are most vulnerable, most in need. The first groups that come to mind, of course, for us are people who have completed the PhD but don't have any institutional full-time affiliation. So, this is one reason it's exciting to be at ACLS at this moment because we are in a position to do some good.



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We can't help thousands of people but we hope to be able to help in the dozens and the hundreds.

The second big aspect or element of ACLS' work historically and now has been working to strengthen academic infrastructure and you'll see I think a lot more activity. I hope you've already seen it among the CEO, the committee, the conference rather of executive officers of the learned societies that direct ACLS support experience, it puts our convening power to the use of the learned societies. And we also have relationships, close relationships with many universities who are trying to figure out in this landscape of competitive fragmentation a whole range of incredibly tough questions about how we should be educating graduate students, how we should be funding our labor, faculty labor in universities. So, again, we can play a convening and hopefully channel dynamic contestation into non-violent and positive solutions. I say that with a with a smile but I'm, of course, absolutely serious.

The third and last big piece of ACLS activity is public visibility of the humanities and humanistic social sciences and we're now thinking afresh in an era where travel and in-person gathering isn't what it was just even a couple of months ago. But we think it's an exciting time to think about everything from how societies are organizing their annual meetings and what the purpose of gatherings together are, how societies could be more visible in public and how humanistic work in general could become more of a part of every person's daily life and thinking about social bonds, what connects us, how we communicate, how we remember history, how we think about our aesthetic experience of the world and a million other things.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. I know that from NCA's perspective that bridge role between colleges and universities, the larger academic infrastructure and learned societies can be a really important place for ACLS. I appreciate the role that ACLS plays there in strengthening the work that learned societies do and recognizing where it all fits. The other piece is the fellowship piece and ACLS in 2019 awarded more than about \$25 million in fellows and grants and grantees across the nation at various institutions, across disciplines, various learned societies. I'm wondering if you could highlight any that you might think might be particularly interesting to communication scholars. I know we've had some luck with the public fellows program of ACLS. But are there any others? Because many of our listeners are not going to be as familiar with the ACLS roster of fellowships and variants.

Joy Connolly:

Right. Yeah. Thank you. I'm glad that you appreciate those and that they're on your radar screen. I'll say a word about the public fellows because it really has become a signature



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program especially among younger scholars across so many fields and that's a program funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as many of our great programs are and that places for two years recent PhDs in non-academic, non-profit organizations ranging from museum education programs all the way to public policy analysis positions. It's really interesting and has incredible ripple effects because not only, of course, do these fellows do good work for the organizations and not only do they grow as people in these jobs but they have interesting largely informal but somewhat formal connections back to their home institutions where they got their PhD and they're serving to be mentors for the next generation encouraging PhDs who are facing unbelievably tough times on the academic job market, that there's a path for them, offering advice and serving as mentors. So, we're trying to think about how to make the most of that, in fact, and make more formal those great mentoring connections.

But I'll mention a couple more. We have a really interesting program funded by the Loose Foundation. It's the Loose ACLS program in religion, journalism and international affairs and that's a program that's been around for four years and it connects scholars of the humanities and social sciences with journalists and media outlets to help strengthen and deepen public understanding of the role that religion plays in the most pressing issues facing people around the world. So, you can imagine the topics here tend to take up issues of sexuality and gender migration, how the media is covering issues related to the environment because of the emphasis of so many world religions on the stewardship of the earth. So, it takes us into very interesting directions. The scholars do fascinating work and it helps do one thing that ACLS has been committed to for a century and that is to break down the boundaries between the university and the world outside.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I think we need to do a better job at NCA of promoting the Loose Fellowship to our members because I certainly believe that there are more than a few media scholars in particular and journalism professionals as well that would find that fellowship very interesting. And along those lines, besides the fellowship and the ways in which those promote and encourage both research and teaching in the humanities, I'm wondering if we might look more broadly at how humanities departments or disciplines with the humanities component work towards I guess bringing more people in and encouraging a greater diversity, sense of equity and a belief in inclusion especially in these challenging times when I suspect we're going to see some constriction of graduate education and where we're also seeing, as you indicated earlier, concern about the job market and the prospects moving forward. How do those relate and what can ACLS do? What can we do as learned societies to help humanities departments increase that level of diversity, equity and inclusion in terms of students, undergraduate and graduate I suppose?



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Joy Connolly:

Yeah. It's such an important question and for me it's tied together. And deciding what string to pull to try to get the whole bundle to roll forward is the really challenging and interesting piece of this work. But let me pull on the string of undergraduate enrollments because let's face it and you know this as well as I do that without undergraduates in our classrooms in whatever discipline we're in, university deans and provosts just don't have the ground to stand on to fund our departments. I was dean for humanities at New York university for four years and I was really blessed as they say to have wonderful creative and civil and friendly, fun-to-work-with colleagues in the deanships of the social sciences and the sciences. But when it came down to it and we were talking about faculty lines and graduate student support, we were always mindful that undergraduates were flocking in those years in greater and greater numbers to economics, to the health sciences, the bench sciences. So, kind of jumping to the last thing you said, what can societies do? Societies are already doing a lot in helping draw faculty members' attention to the just crucial importance of undergraduate teaching and paying attention to it, teaching dynamically, teaching inclusively and not just encouraging but helping train—to use a word a lot of people don't like—train doctoral students to take teaching not as the instrumental mechanism that gets them a salary at a university but as a mission, as a passion. Because without that, we won't have a next generation if we don't have more and more undergrads in the classroom.

For me, this is also connected to the challenge of ensuring that we always have diverse undergraduate bodies interested in what we do because here we are in the 21st century, universities are competing for the first time with more and more alternatives on the internet and on TV filled with really interesting and learned people. So, not every history or literature podcast you see is done by a PhD but man, there are some really good and dynamic sources of information and almost kind of courses and sometimes they actually are formed as courses out there. So, we've got to recognize I think in the higher education space as faculty in colleges and universities that we need to sell ourselves and our material because our students, whatever age they are, have a lot of options. So, I don't sheer away at all from the language of getting out there and being passionate. I don't see it as selling out. I see it as ensuring that we've got a terrifically diverse and an engaged student body and thinking with us.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. The challenge of the undergraduate enrollment issue is only going to get more significant I think for all of our colleagues in the next, what, 10 years, 20 years, as we see these enrollment dips. Add on top of that COVID-19 and the whole challenge that it's all posing for higher education. It's a real sticky wicket as they might say.



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Joy Connolly:

As they might say. I think I am a glass-half-full kind of person but I also hope not to be a Pollyanna in saying this. But I hope that a little bit of the good face-to-face that we're seeing on Zoom or Skype or whatever platform people are using that they have a chance to do something a little bit differently with students, that teachers will be able to say look, this is a weird artificial way of engaging with each other. So, let's make the most of that strangeness and talk about some things we don't usually talk about like why are you in my class, in this communications class or this English composition class or history class but your roommates who are now scattered around the country, they're not doing that. They're doing other courses. So, let's talk about why and what do your families think about what you're studying now that you're at home surrounded by them to try to get a little bit more of a habit of listening to our students and why they're making the choices that they make. I can think of a bunch of ways like that I hope faculty are making use of.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. I do too. I think the nice part of what you suggest there is viewing this optimistically—this situation we find ourselves in—optimistically rather than pessimistically, seeing this as an opportunity rather than a challenge. I know as NCA has thought more significantly about diversity, equity and inclusion within our little learned society, one of the more important things that somebody indicated to me was that we need to stop viewing diversity, equity and inclusion as an issue or a problem. And that's a great segue I think to talking about ACLS's new grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that is designed to support in part equity and inclusion as that moves forward. Can you tell us a little bit about the grant, whether or not these summer institutes that the grants supposed to support are going to happen, those kinds of things? Because I think it's a real manifestation of that more optimistic opportunistic I guess in a positive way sense of diversity, equity and inclusion and what ACLS is doing.

Joy Connolly:

Yeah. But I'll get to the question of whether we're going to hold them this summer first. The answer is still we don't quite know. We're still playing it by ear. We expect some postponement though given the way things are playing out. We had schedule these for June. What are these? They're four-day group meetings that are designed to serve as a kind of retreat for three groups, groups that don't come together naturally in any context that we know of in higher ed but leaders of learned societies and board members, people who have been deeply engaged in the work of learned societies because—I should pause to say why—because learned societies are a glue that connects people within disciplines across institutions. And institutions these days are so unequal and faculty in different schools really feel that inequality whether it's financial, if faculty don't have the resources to travel, do research, teach, help their students as they would



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like or whether it's in terms of status and those who are, of course, connected. So, in this highly unequal environment where that can create a lot of emotional sensitivities as we know, the societies play a huge role in simply existing and convening and giving people collective things to think about. So, learned societies will be represented in these institutes.

The second group are leaders of change in higher education. So, this will be a mix of administrators and faculty and staff, people who want to think about, to use Cathy Davidson's wonderful phrase, the university worth fighting for. What does that look like? And then the third group are in some ways most important to me because they're so rarely at the table in these big debate conversations and that's members of emerging scholars, scholars of color, first gen scholars, people who are entering academia and who are sensitive to the inequities in it, who have ideas about change, who are positive thinking but also realistic and not going to gloss over the challenges they and their colleagues see. So, we hope that by pulling these three groups together, we'll be able to think concretely about change in colleges and universities, in particular practices with the view to making colleges and universities more diverse places of the greatest possible equity and inclusion because that's simply what healthy schools should be, as you said, not thinking about this is a problem but thinking about this as health and success and then allowing news of those changes to be both informed by but also filter out through the learned society so that the meetings have a much greater impact than on the particular schools or societies that the participants belong to. So, we've got great aspirations for these and we're putting together readings, focusing for the first year on issues of racial equity and diversity and we anticipate questions about the public humanities, about tenure guidelines, about the shape of academic careers. Those will come up in successive years because this is a three-year program.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It's interesting. As you were describing the initiatives and the grant from the Mellon Foundation, it occurred to me that that would be something very unusual to those who founded ACLS a little over a century ago. Similarly with NCA, we're about 105 years old, those same issues would not have been as compelling or as present I guess to those founders back in 1914/1915.

Joy Connolly:

It's true although I'll just say that the committee on research in Native American languages got started under the aegis of ACLS in the 1920s and most people know about the Monuments Men which is a great engagement in the preservation of mostly Western European art. But at the same time when you look back at the minutes of the meetings of the American Council of Learned Societies back from the 40s, it's really fascinating. You can see the Monuments Men idea take shape in the meetings of '42 and '43. But at the same time, they were spending just as



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much time on the new committee on negro studies as it was called then which ACLS had also begun. A big conference was set up actually in 1940 because the council members could see that there just wasn't a lot of information floating around academia outside the local about the huge advances that were taken in the 20s and 30s in what we now call African-American studies. So, yeah, different but there's some continuity there too.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, that's great. And I'm wondering if there are any other major accomplishments that you're finding with your review I assume of the history of ACLS over the first hundred years and where we're going from there. What can we expect for the next century of ACLS and its leadership in higher education?

Joy Connolly:

Yeah. I'll call out two things although, of course, as an enthusiastic new president I could go on for a long time but I promise I won't. But back in the 60s, ACLS was very on the ball in pioneering what we now call digital scholarship and back in '64, ACLS established a program of grants and fellowships that were designed to encourage what they called new and significant use of computers in humanistic research. So, yeah, the use of computers. So, we're very proud of that because that's been the platform on which we've built the digital innovation fellowships which supported some of the most prominent early digital scholars who are still working in this field today and digital extension grants which is a program that still goes on that's designed to support programs located at colleges and universities that have gotten off the ground but need continued funding to reach their full potential. That's one.

The other is the international programs which I haven't talked so much about and one we're very proud of the African Humanities Program which is supported by the Carnegie Corporation. And the main achievement of that group is to have set up an association of humanities groups in five African countries that are quickly reaching autonomy which is the goal here, that they will function these groups as an ACLS of a sort in Africa so a self-sustaining autonomous group sustaining the studies of the humanities and humanistic social sciences in Africa where the scene is not so different from the U.S. where humanists find themselves elbowing for room at the table in these universities. So, yeah, digital research and support of locally governed humanities supporting societies in Africa. Those are just two of the things I'd single out.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So, where do we go for the next 100 years? You're blazing the trails.



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Joy Connolly:

We are. We did a strategic planning process this year. We started back in August and talked with literally hundreds of people in the course of that, actually literally hundreds. We designed a plan that identified four I'll just call them pillars for now to use the most neutral word and we attached under those pillars or priorities a set of projects that range from things we had just begun to do to the pretty wildly aspirational. That plan was finished literally the week before the impact of COVID-19 started to become visible to us. And we looked at the plan again and we said we could put this out there and put a date stamp on it and say forgive us but this was the sum of six months of work and we want to share it with you or we could say let's delve back into it and pick out what's absolutely crucial and produce a much more pared-down plan and that's what we did. So, we're on the verge of releasing in a couple weeks a plan that will go with these four priorities which are supporting scholars and scholarship and expanding as far as we can the definition of what counts as scholarship especially with an eye here on public humanities and the study of underrepresented groups. And second, the strengthening of academic infrastructure with a special focus here on helping universities support the most vulnerable especially those people with PhDs who don't have full-time employment. And then third the lifting up of the visibility of humanists and humanistic studies in the public eye. And fourth, our own internal resilience. So, these are I have to admit kind of very strategic planny kinds of pillars but they represent the passions that we have as we go forward with the commitment to support those who have the least means of support to sustain the most diverse landscape of humanistic studies as possible and to encourage whenever we can universities to innovate, to make the most of digital technology, to make the most of the newly diverse undergraduate student bodies we're seeing and to not just change with the times but lead change, think around corners. We see ourselves at ACLS as helping colleges and universities do that.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm going to be interested in exploring more and more of this notion of internal resiliency. I think that's becoming an important pillar for all of us I suspect. I'll just say by way of concluding that NCA is really proud to be a member of ACLS and we're anxious and eager to support the work that you're doing and the work that ACLS is doing to advance the humanities and the humanistic social sciences. So, it's been great to talk to you and thanks so much for joining us today on *Communication Matters*.

Joy Connolly:

Thank you, Trevor. It's always a pleasure to talk to you and I look forward to seeing you in person as soon as the world allows it.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Indeed. Thanks again, listeners, for joining us today on another episode of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. In NCA news, in light of NCA's summer event cancellations, NCA has developed a special online speaker series. This series is aimed at offering faculty and students the opportunity to learn about new directions in communication research and in teaching communication such as emerging trends and media representations of marginalized groups. The series will begin June 1st. Speakers will present a seminar each full week of June. Each seminar will be comprised of five virtual lectures hosted on the NCA website. So, learn more about this seminar speaker series at natcom.org/NCA-Speaker-Series. That's natcom.org/NCA-Speaker-Series. Also in NCA news, consider submitting your poster and a short video to NCA's poster session series, an online repository of poster session presentations. Communication faculty and graduate students who may have missed the opportunity to present their poster or their research at a conference because of COVID-19 or who had to defend their dissertation or thesis online can submit their poster and a 10 to 12 minute video for inclusion in the series. Review the submission guidelines and complete the submission form on the NCA website at natcom.org/NCA-Poster-Sessions. That's natcom.org/NCA-Poster-Sessions.

And listeners, finally, I hope you'll tune in for a Memorial Day bonus episode of *Communication Matters* focusing on NCA's newest division, the communication and military division. The podcast will feature scholars involved in the creation of the new division including Steve Wilson, a professor in the department of communication at the University of South Florida, William Howe, a recent doctoral graduate of the department of communication at the University of Oklahoma and an incoming assistant professor at the University of Kentucky and Elizabeth Desnoyers-Colas, associate professor of communication at Georgia Southern University. So, be sure to tune in to learn more about this growing area of study and NCA's new communication and military division.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles and is recorded in our national office in downtown Washington DC. The podcast is recorded and produced by Assistant Director for Digital Strategies Chelsea Bowes with writing support from



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Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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