



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 12: Food (in)security Communication

****Please note: This is a rough transcription of this audio podcast. This transcript is not edited for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.****

Participants:

Trevor Parry-Giles
Megan Schraedley
Marianne LeGreco

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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:

Today's episode of *Communication Matters* features new research published in NCA's Journal of Applied Communication Research. Professors Megan K. Schraedley and Marianne LeGreco, two of the authors of 'Food (in)security communication: a *Journal of Applied Communication Research* forum addressing current challenges and future possibilities' join me today to discuss research on communication and food insecurity. A little background, Dr. Schraedley is an assistant professor of organizational communication in the Department of Communication and Media at Westchester University and Dr. LeGreco is an associate professor and director of graduate studies in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Hey, Megan and Marianne, welcome to *Communication Matters*.

Marianne LeGreco:

Hello.



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Megan Schraedley:

Hi, thank you for having us.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I really thought that this forum idea and the whole discussion of food insecurity and food security communication is really important. But some of our listeners may have heard the term food insecurity but may not really be all that familiar with the technical definition. So, how do you all define food insecurity in the context of this forum?

Megan Schraedley:

Sure. I'll start out. This is Megan, Dr. Schraedley. And I was going to say that I think of food security more as individuals who have access at all times to high quality, culturally appropriate and affordable food or able to produce food for themselves, the ability to. But the technical definition is certainly more complicated than that I think. It's got the four pillars which are part of the definition created by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and they include access to food, availability of food so how easy is it to get food and then utilization which encompasses the nutrition or nourishment requirements of different bodies and stability so those three other factors over time: the access, availability and utilization. And I certainly see hunger and food security as two different things, hunger being much more difficult to measure or maybe even account for at the population level.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Who are some of your collaborators on this project, Megan, and what drew you to it to begin with?

Megan Schraedley:

Yeah. So, Marianne LeGreco who's joining us today, she's one of the collaborators and all of the collaborators were really wonderful and there's a lot of other incredible communication scholars doing work related to food security, poverty and the environment. But I asked eight other individuals to join me in this forum because their work either has some sort of applied dimension to food security or security and water security and land, other types of things like that. So, Dr. Hamilton Bean who's an associate professor at University of Colorado-Denver, Dr. Sarah Dempsey who's an associate professor at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Dr. Mohan Dutta who's a professor at Massey University in New Zealand, Dr. Kathleen Hunt who's an assistant professor at The State University of New York-New Paltz, Dr. Sonia Ivancic, an assistant professor at the University of South Florida, Dr. Kristen Okamoto who is an assistant professor at Clemson University and finally, Dr. Timothy Sellnow who's a professor at University of Central Florida. So, people from all over which is great.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

What's I think also kind of interesting is the unique structure of the article and the forum article which originally took place as a conversation on Facebook and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about why you chose Facebook as the medium for this conversation and I think a lot of our listeners whether or not they're involved with Facebook or not would be interested in talking about or thinking about how it is you go about converting a conversation on Facebook into an academic article.

Megan Schraedley:

Yeah, absolutely. I can say a little bit about the background of this and I'm interested too to hear from Marianne a little bit about what it was like for you to participate too in the forum. I'll say it's not an endorsement of Facebook by any means or Mark Zuckerberg.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I know.

Megan Schraedley:

But I chose Facebook for several reasons. I really wanted the forum to be interactive and in real time for us to interact together over several months thinking about food, communication and security as how all those things are interrelated. So, Facebook is quite convenient for those of us that are living across the U.S. and across the globe and it really allowed us to engage in a couple of different ways. So, first, on a more casual level just getting to know each other. Some of us had never met each other before the forum and then on a more professional level where we're able to share some ideas about the challenges we're working on either in our communities or with organizations we may have worked with in the past. Yeah, just through research or our service work. And we had a lot of rough check-in times or dates where we were throughout the summer last year able to contribute and to share things from teaching activities to excerpts from our research to videos, other types of forums we might have participated in, photographs and other types of things. I think to answer the second part of your question about converting that conversation on Facebook into an academic article was really challenging and I'll say at the same time as I was doing this, I was moving from California to Pennsylvania so that added another layer of complexity too. But as a qualitative researcher by training, I really enjoyed highlighting and identifying some of the different themes that came through and emerged from our online conversation. So, essentially, I ended up copying and pasting kind of the old-fashioned way all the text from our conversations into a blank Word document and I'm sure there's a much savvier way of capturing all of the conversations now that I've done this and listeners can certainly write to me and tell me what I should use next time. But what I ended up doing was really just highlighting with the highlighter and sticky notes the important moments that spoke to some of the original questions I'd developed going into the forum. So, we'd developed about six or seven questions that we all then ended up answering over some months and I noted some of the more



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poignant stories that seemed to move the other collaborators on the piece, the ones that got lots of comments, the posts that definitely spoke to the applied nature of food, communication and security. And then I ended up sharing several drafts of the piece with all the collaborators and letting them see how it looked to keep that interactive feeling.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I think that's a good segue to talking about some of those themes and some of those important highlighted parts. And Marianne, in the forum, you mentioned that you're concerned particularly with what it takes to be food secure as opposed to food insecure and how people use the term food security. I'm wondering what your interests there are about. How does the definition of food security affect how public policy works in this area of significant public policy concern?

Marianne LeGreco:

I think a lot of times we have a tendency to frame things in terms of the insecurity part of the food security conversation. So, we tend to approach things from a deficit model in terms of what don't people have access to that they need in order to make the decisions that they would like to make about what they want to eat. And when you start to shift things toward more of a security conversation, it's more of a what resources do you have and how can you build upon those. And I was really inspired by some of the comments from both Kristen Okamoto and Mohan Dutta when they were talking about creating infrastructure for people who are more at the margins so people who don't always have a voice in how they get to construct their food choices, how they get folded into the conversation because we start to get a more complete picture of what it actually means for a place to be food secure. And one of the things that Kristen brings up is the idea of narrative resilience and how we become resilient communities when we focus on the place where we're doing the organizing. I have lived in North Carolina now for almost 13 years but before then, I lived in Arizona for seven years and the food systems are drastically different. You're in a desert in one area and a year-round food system in the other area. And so, there are completely different methods of organizing there. So, what it means to be food secure means very different things I think in Arizona as opposed to North Carolina because your questions of access are different. And so, when we start focusing on what kind of resources do you have and how can you turn that into a system collectively and as a community that makes sure that people can make their own food choices in ways they want to, then I think we're starting to move more closely to the idea of what it means to be food secure.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I think that bears on one of the other aspects that you noted in the forum about this question and this particular research area which is that communities and interest groups can sometimes focus more on a technical dimension to food security and food insecurity such as managing like social media and developing advertising, email messages, that kind of thing. And it sounds to me like



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you're envisioning a bigger picture view of how we think of communication and food security/insecurity and if you can elaborate on that because I think that's really interesting.

Marianne LeGreco:

Sure. Well, I think it kind of parallels with the structure of the article itself because it centers communication. Like Megan did a really awesome job of centering communication in how we talked about food and food security as part of the forum article and I think Mohan Dutta is doing similar things with his culture-centered approach and I know Sarah Dempsey and I have had some conversations about this in terms of how do we create more of that infrastructure so that we're centering communication in the process. A lot of times we have a tendency to center economy. We have a tendency to center policy. We think about that technical side of things when it comes to communication. So, there have been many times when I've been invited on grants and I've been introduced as oh, here's Marianne and she does our social media and I'm like no, I do a little bit more than that. I have a tendency to be the person who's running around to all of the meetings and making sure that different groups that are having conversations around food are talking to each other. And so, we can do a lot as communication scholars I think to center communication practices in how we talk about food and then use that as a way to propel conversations about food security, food economy, food systems. I mean right now I think because of COVID-19, we're experiencing some really interesting challenges when it comes to having a largely centralized food system and we're starting to see some of the tensions around that. And we just happen to be really lucky right now that we're having this experience going into the summer so that we've got a lot more local food security. In North Carolina, I know people are feeling a little bit more secure because we've got more farmers markets that are starting to have crops come in, we're starting to have more local produce. And so, they feel a little bit better about their food access when they realize that things in the centralized level and up top are getting a little bit more stringent and less secure.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's interesting. I was going to ask you all about the sort of linkages with this pandemic situation and the COVID-19 dynamic. My partner was just telling me today that she'd read some article about some real dangers about food shortages farther down the pike and not so much in the United States but elsewhere around the world as a function of this food pandemic which speaks to Mohan's interests in culture and location and place and all of that. I think that's fascinating. I've been troubled by the explosion of food banks and the fragility of the economy such that after just a couple of weeks, lines of people are going to food banks and that's obviously relevant to what you all are talking about as well. Megan, you mentioned in the forum and maybe this is related to the pandemic dimension as well that you're interested in the connection between strategic ambiguity and discussions about food insecurity. Could you tell us a little bit more about what strategic ambiguity refers to in this context and how that's something we should be focused on?



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Megan Schraedley:

Yes, absolutely. So, strategic ambiguity as Eisenberg worked with this concept for a long time really allows organizational members to first promote a unified diversity so bringing together several different perspectives without fracturing a community or an organization or even a nation and then facilitating organizational changes so when we're going through difficult times like a disaster or a crisis and then being able to preserve privileged positions of those in power. So, as Marianne was talking about, those who then become relegated to the margins of society, we have to think about how we can shift some of those positions. So, what I'm really interested in is understanding and looking for ways in which organizations can change how they create food policy and how communities can take control over their own food systems. And to understand how those shifts can really happen, I think it's important to understand the local and international policy making entities that go about creating policy. So, I think strategic ambiguity in the context of discussions about food security or food insecurity becomes more interesting when we really look at the ambiguity as a resource and how it allows for a constant shifting of positions of those who might be involved in maybe complex organizational commitments or have several different commitments. And so, members of the U.S. government, lobbying organizations, farmers, nonprofits, all of these groups have to massage the meaning of food security to meet their own needs which I think is what really makes this interesting, that everyone uses the term or the language of food security but you want to know to what ends they're using that term. And so, yeah, Marianne, please jump in for any—

Marianne LeGreco:

There are multiple times when I will be in a meeting with community organizations where we will be working through something and I will literally say how about we use a little strategic ambiguity here and I will literally invoke this concept because there have been many instances where, for example, we were organizing a food council for Guilford County which is where Greensboro is located and we were having a difficult time because several of the people who were involved in the conversation were very grassroots-oriented and wanted to focus on activism and advocacy as part of one of the goals of the food council and there were several city and county organizations that were involved in the conversation and as part of their job descriptions, it literally says you cannot be an activist or advocate; you can only educate. And so, they were always tiptoeing around what they could and couldn't do as a part of their work with us. And so, what we ended up doing was we created this special advisory group to the food council so that anybody who was in a job where they were not allowed to advocate or be an activist, they could operate in this space and then the whole food council itself could still have more of an activist and advocacy orientation. But I think that's kind of that delicate dance that you have to do because there are policy commitments that cooperative extensions have that limit some of the abilities that they have to advocate and it's hard to do that kind of work when you've got 300-acre farms and 30-acre farms that you're both serving. And so, I think that particular concept I think is really important when it comes to again centering communication because not everybody's going to have the same



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approach to food security. And so, if you can figure out how to do that delicate ambiguous dance, then I think we can start to push conversations forward.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Is that the same kind of strategic ambiguity that you saw at work at the United States Agency for International Development? Megan, you talked about that. Marianne describes sort of on the ground going meta, getting everybody to think about strategic ambiguity. Is that what you saw also at work at USAID?

Megan Schraedley:

Yeah. I love that Marianne described that as this delicate dance because USAID is an independent agency of the U.S. federal government kind of under the branch of the State Department but they're really responsible for administering civilian foreign aid and development assistance so usually through technical or financial means to countries that they decide every year they want to send aid to. And so, USAID officers and administrators ended up really using that strategic ambiguity when working to pass the Global Food Security Act of 2016 which I think we can remember back to was a really contentious time between our parties in Congress and they ended up having it be a bipartisan law that they passed and they reauthorized it or refunded it in 2018. And so, the officers of USAID were incredibly knowledgeable about food insecurities causes and effects internationally as well as the research going into developing solutions. But they were super careful about how and when and even what they were discussing about food security because they talked about the danger of openly advocating for the Global Food Security Act, that they could be fired even just in our conversations when I would promise anonymity and things like that. So, that danger was really clear and it was interesting to me to think about the culture of our government kind of inspiring, I don't know, some of this fear and danger.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It sounds to me like those are amongst some of the challenges that scholars and practitioners who are interested in this question of food security and insecurity. Could you comment on some of the other challenges that scholars and practitioners face when they engage with this question?

Marianne LeGreco:

Absolutely. I can give you a quick example from some of the organizing that we've immediately done with social distancing and stay-at-home orders going in place around COVID-19. I think one of the biggest challenges is getting people organized in a network quickly to work together. Trevor, you were talking earlier about the proliferation of food banks and how more and more people are starting to rely on food support from outside organizations and we've been facing a lot of this in Greensboro over the past decade. We were at the top of the Food Research and Action Center's list of communities experiencing food hardship in the U.S. in 2014 and 2015. And around all of that, we've done a lot of organizing to try to network people together. And so, when our Guilford



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County schools closed, we were able to immediately get up a network so that kids could have places to go and eat Monday through Friday and then get food over the weekend. We were able to get a food resource list out for both Greensboro and High Point which are two major metropolitan areas in the county. And so, we had a list of all of the food banks, all of the free meal locations, all of the hours for grocery stores. We had community lists of restaurants that were offering curbside and delivery and we put all of that together really really quickly. But it's because we had that conversation already going and we had those relationships built and if you don't have that, it can be a real challenge to try to respond to these unexpected situations and these uncertain scenarios and trying to make sure that people have access to food in the midst of a crisis. And I think from a communication perspective, I think that's really important and really key. The relationships in the community are really at the core of all of this.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. I'm struck by the fact as you talk about all of that that alongside the food insecurity issues, we've also got this emerging dynamic with the COVID pandemic situation of health disparities. I mean the dramatic impacts of this particular virus on communities of color in particular and what that is telling us about the health disparities. It's a lot for people to process I think. And so, it's great that you've got those mechanisms in place at least in Greensboro to deal with one level of all of the dynamics that are happening surrounding this pandemic. Are there other challenges?

Megan Schraedley:

Absolutely. COVID-19 certainly in the back of my mind as I'm thinking through all of this, part of the challenge I think is to bridge as scholars the gulf between materiality and discourse. I know this has been a conversation for a long time. But especially in a time of crisis, the way that we talk about our own food, how we are or aren't hoarding, the types of things we might need, making assumptions about our neighbors or our friends or our family members and what kinds of conversations are we having with them about what they're eating and how much they're eating and the kind of anxieties this draws out in people when they are not able to express need and being able to preserve a sense of dignity for those who might not be able to go to a food bank or who don't want to go to a food bank but still don't have the food that they need whether nutritionally or just quantity in their homes. So, I think that's one of the challenges. Another certainly that I remember Dr. Sellnow, Tim Sellnow bringing up in the forum is communication scholars having to understand and be able to discuss and talk about biology, agriculture, nutrition because this work is so interdisciplinary and that's difficult. We have to be able to build on the science but intersect with corporations and countries that might be seeking to maximize a profit and being careful about analyzing and discussing that.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

So much of that background or additional insight is so important so that, as Marianne said earlier, we're not just the social media people on research projects and community outreach initiatives and that sort of thing. Now ideally a forum in JACR and all of that is fodder for future research and future teaching. I'm wondering if you guys have any sense of how food insecurity and food security intersects or can expand what it is we think about in terms of communication research, communication teaching, how is it relevant to the bigger and broader dynamics in communication studies and what it is we're doing and what we're teaching. Departments especially if they're offering online courses are going to be probably unable to offer whole seminars in food and food communication. So, I'm wondering how all this works within the research and teaching frameworks of our colleagues.

Marianne LeGreco:

Yeah. This is a great question. I was really happy that the forum came along when it did because I was finishing a book manuscript in the midst of it and there were so many times that what we spoke about through Facebook helped influence some of the conclusions that I was drawing for the book and it's a book on communicating food justice activism in a time of food hardship. And so, it's about eight case studies of what we've been doing in Greensboro and I think two of the big takeaways that I think were influenced a bit by the forum are future directions when it comes to food security and that kind of research and a lot of it goes to the intersections for me between organizational and health communication and that so much of this is about building communication infrastructure that people can access easily, that's also getting us to directly address some issues of poverty as well that also get into issues of gender, of racism, so on and so forth and that that communication infrastructure is incredibly important. So, having networks of people that as part of our research particularly from an applied perspective, we can do a lot to build those networks and build those relationships so that we can create these resource lists when we experience times of food insecurity. I also think that in addition to infrastructure, there's the idea—this came out from one of the participants of a failed food cooperative in Greensboro and one of the things that she said was organize, organize, organize and never stop. And when I was participating in the forum and when I was reading this participant's comments at the same time, I'm like that's what we have to do with communication folks, is that we have to organize, organize, organize and never stop and figure out how we weave that into both our research and our teaching. So, I'm teaching an organizational seminar at the graduate level this Fall and I'm definitely going to work in food organizations as one avenue for students to think about how they can address issues around COVID-19, around food security. Thinking about things in an online environment, I do a lot of community engaged in service learning work and that has changed significantly the last little bit. And so, I think that's the direction I'm heading at least. I've always really focused on trying to weave together my research, my teaching and my service and I'm hoping to continue that with some food work in the Fall as well.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

I'm thinking as you as you talk about that, that I can envision food security and food insecurity for many of our students as being one of those moments when you quit taking for granted that which many of us take for granted and are privileged to be able to take for granted. And I'm thinking of that as a really important pedagogical sort of advance.

Marianne LeGreco:

I will never forget a story of a student who I brought into a service-learning class one summer, somebody from our department of social services to talk about SNAP, EBT and food stamps. And the student realized oh, I'm eligible because I have a 40 hour a week job. And so, he went to go apply but he'd been painting houses for a guy who was paying him under the table. And so, he had no documentation, no tax records, nothing to prove that he had income so that he could be eligible for SNAP/EBT. So, I felt like I had introduced him to this resource that was really going to be helpful for him and then it was all taken away. And I think for our students these issues of food insecurity and food justice and food activism are incredibly important and we don't always realize just how much our students are facing some of these issues as well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's right, that's right. Megan, any thoughts on future research possibilities and where we go next with food security and food insecurity and food studies in general?

Megan Schraedley:

Yeah, absolutely. So, I would say throughout the forum, all of us talked a lot about the role of narrative and story and listening to those stories. And I think that that was really powerful that we I think sometimes forget that is a part of communication and not just to offer solutions or offer insights but to acknowledge that those who are telling the stories, that their stories matter and being able to kind of pass those stories down as well. I think that's important whether you're teaching a class or involved in advocacy or involved in research too around security in all of its forms. And then I think finally being able to offer, like Marianne said, shared resources for accessing food, for creating one's own food but also being able to share platforms or ways for people to do the sharing so that the burden is not on every individual to create everything for themselves, right? That there is a privilege that comes with being able to grow your own food or maybe even to know how to do that. And so, I think there's some room certainly for research in the future around creating this sort of community resilience, bouncing forward and looking towards a stronger future where we have these networks that can provide security and that we can rely on sustainably over time.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. And I'm really grateful for both of you both for joining me today on *Communication Matters* but also for this work. I think this is really important and this reach out to broader



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communities and bringing awareness to all of us about these important issues is really valuable work and I'm very appreciative for you guys joining me today and for this work that you're doing. It's been great.

Marianne LeGreco:

Thank you. It's been great to join you today.

Megan Schraedley:

Yeah. It's been really wonderful. Thank you.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Thank you both for joining me today. This is an exciting and important area of research for so many communities. Listeners, this free to access forum article is now available on NCA's website at natcom.org/podcast. That's natcom.org/podcast. As a reminder, in NCA news, we are hosting a special online speaker series throughout the month of June. In the first seminar of the series, West Virginia University Professor Scott A. Myers discussed classroom communication. This week Amy D. Clark, professor at the University of Virginia's College at Wise is leading a seminar on the rhetoric of death in central Appalachia. Each seminar features free to access virtual lectures hosted on the NCA website with no registration or NCA membership required. Each weekday at 9 00 a.m. Eastern Time, the speaker series page will be updated with a new virtual seminar package consisting of a video readings and resources. So, check back daily and watch all of the videos in this series on the NCA website 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 missed the opportunity to present the poster at a conference because of COVID-19 or who defended their dissertation or thesis online can submit their poster and a 10 to 12 minute video for inclusion in this series. You can review the submission guidelines and complete the submission form on the NCA website at natcom.org/NCA-Poster-Sessions, natcom.org/NCA-Poster-Sessions.

And listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the next episode of *Communication Matters* which focuses on a special issue of NCA's Journal of International and Intercultural Communication entitled 'The Subcontinent Speaks: Intercultural Communication Perspectives from and on South Asia'. Guest co-editors Shaunak Sastry and Srividya Ramasubramanian will join the podcast to discuss the topics tackled by the articles in this special issue such as the similarities between an Indian right-wing news site and U.S. based right-wing news sites and much more. I hope you'll tune in to hear more about this important and exciting new area of communication research.



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

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