



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**
Episode 25: Virtual Martin Luther King, Jr. Project

****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
Victoria Gallagher
Derek Ham
Keon Pettway

[Audio Length: 0:49:16]

RECORDING BEGINS

Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Hello, I'm Trevor Perry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association and I'm your host on *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*. Thanks for joining us for today's episode.

Hey, listeners, have you ever wondered what it would be like to actually hear a famous speech from American history in person like the Gettysburg address or John F. Kennedy's inaugural address? What if you could step back in time to the 1960s and hear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. speak in person? Today's *Communication Matters* episode explores the virtual Martin Luther King Jr. Project or vMLK which recreates one of Dr. King's iconic speeches through digital technology. Joining me today are the project's North Carolina State University principal investigators, Dr. Victoria Gallagher, Derek Ham, and Keon Pettway. Now before we begin, and this is going to be a really interesting conversation. I'm certainly looking forward to it. But before we begin let me tell you a little bit about our guests,

Victoria Gallagher is a professor in the department of communication at North Carolina State University. Dr. Gallagher's primary area of publication and scholarship is rhetorical criticism particularly of civil rights related discourse, museums, memorials, and public art. Most recently, Dr. Gallagher is the co-editor of *Communicative Cities in the 21st Century* and author of an introduction and a chapter in that collection. Hi, Victoria. Thanks for joining us today.

Victoria Gallagher:

Hi, thanks so much, Trevor. It's really an honor to be here and to tell you more about our project.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

Derek Ham is an associate professor and the department head of art and design at North Carolina State University. Dr. Ham's research interests include game-based learning, algorithmic thinking, and digital fabrication and making. Dr. Ham investigates both virtual reality and augmented reality technology to uncover the ways in which these tools can expand on the possibilities of interaction design. Hi, Derek. Thanks for coming on *Communication Matters* today.

Derek Ham:

Hi, thank you. Nice to be here and thank you for having us to talk about the project.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Keon Pettway is an independent researcher and principal product designer at Celigo, a technology company that develops cloud-based applications. Dr. Pettway's research explores social protest movements, visual rhetorics of photography, black cultural expression, health and ecological risk, and designing public spaces for civic engagement. Hi, Keon. Thanks for joining us on *Communication Matters*.

Keon Pettway:

Hi. Thank you for inviting us. Looking forward to a great conversation.

[Audio Clip] Martin Luther King, Jr.:

Victor Hugo once said that there is nothing in the world more powerful than an idea whose time has come. The dynamic idea whose time has come today is the quest for freedom and human dignity. Men are tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. They are tired of being plunged into the abyss of exploitation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. And so, all over the world, formerly oppressed people are making it palpably clear that they are determined to be free.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That was some audio from the virtual MLK project featuring audiences engaged in guided listening of the different sound experiences of Martin Luther King's 1960 speech, *A Creative Protest: Fill Up the Jails*. Let's talk a little bit about the unique context of this project. The vMLK project is a collaboration between the White Rock Baptist Church congregation and North Carolina State University. Victoria, could you tell us a little bit about how this collaboration came about and how the project developed and all of that sort of background information?

Victoria Gallagher:

Sure. I'll start off and then I'll ask Keon to also fill in because he was there right from the start. So, this began in 2013 when I had a junior colleague who was very interested in the Moral Monday



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protests that were going on in North Carolina. Some of our graduate students were also interested in those. Jeff Swift was a doctoral student at the time. He went on to work for Nation Builder and is now on the faculty I believe at Western Virginia University. But we were looking for a speech that really would connect issues of the day with the past especially the civil rights history past of North Carolina. And the reason we were looking for such a speech was because I had been inspired by a colleague who was doing a really interesting recreation of a John Dunn speech at a moment way back in history and using technologies that were coming into being at NC State through our libraries, our Hunt Library which is an award-winning incredible technology library. And we had these spaces that I would then view things in, and I thought we can do a rhetorically informed project with this technology in these spaces that will really help us get at this concept we've long theorized and articulated of transformation, of a kairotic moment when you bring together just the right speaker at just the right time with just the right audience and transformation happens. And that was my goal from the start to say, how can we do something that is historical, civil rights related but speaks to the contemporary moment? And that's where the speech comes from. We notified people that we were looking. We found this speech that King gave in 1960 at the White Rock Baptist Church just two weeks at the start of the sit-ins in Greensboro. And it's the first time that he calls out direct, non-violent social action as the future of the movement, saying, even if we have to fill up the jails of the South, this is what we've got to do going forward, and we're putting the full weight of the SCLC behind this. So, that was the start with the speech. Keon, do you want to talk a little bit about the congregation and our partnership and how that came to be?

Keon Pettaway:

Sure, yeah. So, the White Rock Baptist Church have been the most ideal partners in this effort. We couldn't have asked for a better partner. So, during the time when the recreation of the speech, it ensued at White Rock, the congregation was more than happy to be involved to get the rest of the congregation involved. It was I know over 200 people who attended altogether, and that is tremendous when you talk about a recreation of a speech, let alone providing the space. Right? As we know, the environment is so critical to rhetorical speech itself, the location where it happens. And the fact, the White Rock allowed us to recreate the speech in the sanctuary, the new sanctuary. It was more than generous, and I would say that White Rock opening up their arms and opening up their doors in a symbolic, in a very material sense, that kind of embodies what kind of relationship we have with White Rock even up into the day of the speech. They invite and suggest their congregation members attend the vMLK exhibitions. They provide feedback. They provide additional resources. And so, the partnership and relationship certainly started with the recreation of a speech back in 2014. But fast forward to now seven years later, that partnership has now grown into something fantastic and I think something that we can all kind of take away from doing digital humanities work, that in addition to the people who are there witnessing the speech. Right? Both listening to it in its audible form but also in the written and also in the visual



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and material form and enactments, I would say that also the relationship with White Rock has also transformed. Right? And I think that's something significant to take away from digital humanities projects, that in addition to the people who are participating, the external participants, the people who are actually doing the work and the organizations are also being transformed at the very same time. And that's something critical about vMLK.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's a really interesting dynamic with regard to a sort of university academic project and how it links up with the local community. What's the nature of that transformation?

Keon Pettway:

I would say that one particular thing that I would say that has transformed is how as rhetorical scholars, as design researchers, computational designers, as architects, how is it that we curate such a story and also, make sure we're good stewards of that story at the very same time? We know all too well the history particularly of African-Americans, black folk in this country who were taken advantage of both in science, in medicine, in politics, in economics, and the arts. And when you have a project like vMLK where White Rock Baptist Church has now given us not only the responsibility but has given us the nod to say treat our stories well, treat it with care. Right? And I think for vMLK, I think what is transformed is the more and more we became involved with White Rock Baptist Church, the more we started to really think about the stories that were being told and how we had to curate them very carefully. We had to make sure we had buy-in. We had to not only tell them what they were doing but invite them to see it and critique it and tell us what did we miss. Right? And so, I think one of those transformations that happened over time is that no longer did the project become something about we were presenting something out into the open. We were now really working with White Rock to say we don't know it all, and we miss some things. We also know that the archives are very finicky. And so, we need to think about your stories and your embodied experience as part of our archives. And that's different. Right? For a project that we were looking for archives that no longer existed. However, they did exist. They existed at White Rock.

Victoria Gallagher:

I was just going to say it's sort of looking at the faces of the project. The recreation event was amazing because it was over 250 people, 10 to 15 people who were there were at the original speech in 1960 who came to the recreation. The Durham Ministerial Alliance which is such a significant community in our area for civil rights, their members came. We came from NC State. Politicians came. It was just a remarkable group of people at that recreation event. The choir sang, the pastors were there, they prayed. And when people ask us about the sound clips and the audience response, the call and response you hear in the sound clips, they're like, oh, did you stage that? No. That occurred in that church at that moment with the recreation and with the voice



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actor, Mr. Marvin Blanks who was incredible, who did an incredible job. But then we have this. We start working with this. We set up a website. We do an exhibition. We start giving people a sense of this. But in 2019 Fall, we go back to White Rock, and we say to them, critique us. We invited them to our NEH workshop, and we said, here's all of it. Here's everything we've done, everything we've presented, all of the materials. We're going to take you through. We have other scholars there, people from around the country, humanities advisors. And we said, okay, critique us. Tell us what we've done well. Tell us where we still need to go. And the moment of transformation for me at that workshop was the White Rock folks saying, we want everybody to hear this story. How can we get this out even more? How can we use this to reinvigorate our community? I mean this is a congregation that's over 150 years old. How can we today activate people in a way that matters both as a church community and as a part of the larger Durham community? And so, we did a 60th anniversary exhibition where the entire church came.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Wow.

Victoria Gallagher:

And then we went to White Rock, and we took VR, a mobile VR lab to White Rock so that they could showcase the VR for everybody in their community. And those moments of saying, okay, yes, we, as Keon said, want to be so careful to have such high quality in how we tell this story that you will want it and love it and want to share it with everybody you can.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. Maybe we can geek out a little bit on the tech part of it all. And Derek can tell us a little bit more about how this recreation, this reenactment, how you captured that notion of sound and the importance of sound in creating that immersive experience? I mean how all that worked. Because boy, this is really outside of my wheelhouse, and I find it a fascinating dimension to all of this.

Derek Ham:

Well, it's funny in a lot of ways. We were a glutton for punishment because we were developing on the VR technology side in real time that the technology itself is being developed. I mean put this in perspective, Dr. Gallagher said the project started in 2013. In 2013, the technology that we ended up using, the VR headset, Oculus Rift wasn't even available to the public. I had a development kit. There were a couple of ones in labs across universities. And so, not only was the accessibility to the hardware kind of a gamble that we knew hey, this VR technology is growing, it's going to be more accessible. So, we should be in here early. In real time, the technology itself was changing. I remember from day one, one of the first experiences that we had when we began to translate the content that we had into a virtual environment, there wasn't



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a notion of even having something called hand controllers. We were using an Xbox gamepad. So, it was really interesting to see this evolve in real time. But we were blessed to have a really great team. If you think about all the parties that are involved in recreating a space that no longer exists. We can't go to the church today and take measurements off of it. We only have a handful of pictures of the interior of Dr. King on that evening. And so, we're talking about in a lot of ways like forensics here, looking at what material we had and then partnering together with architects and creating new blueprints, if you will, from the existing pieces that we have, recreating the 3D models, recreating the pews, recreating the spatial geometries that are lost in time. And so, that process of developing those computer models, putting them together was happening in real time with the evolution of this thing called VR. Now it's great that we could do this because now we have this thing that oftentimes if you think about these projects, these come much later in years. New technology comes out, and then someone later applies it to something that has such strong historical and social significance. But I'm proud that as a group, we were harnessing technology that was evolving today in a project that anyone else would probably have overlooked.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Right, right. And just so our listeners know, the actual White Rock Baptist Church was torn down a few years ago, a few years really after the speech was given. And so, this recreation was both an oral or audio recreation but also a spatial one. Right? A physical one. And just so everybody knows, it wasn't as if the project was able to go back to the same church and be exactly in the same space.

Victoria Gallagher:

Well, really interesting about that, Trevor, is the way in which space and place is so meaningful to people and resides in our memory in such remarkable ways. Because the church was torn down in '67 to put in the Durham freeway which decimated a thriving neighborhood. Right? And so, it's part of that long story of on the heels of civil rights, suddenly, we're decimating African-American neighborhoods with federal highway funds. And this church was part of that story. And what's interesting is when Derek, when we showed the White Rock Baptist Church community the most recent VR back in May of 2019 and they were there as a group seeing this all together and the pastor was there. And he said to me, he goes, well, now I understand why when we built the new sanctuary, people wanted the baptismal font like up front in the corner. I couldn't figure out why people wanted it there. It shouldn't have been there it didn't make sense for all kinds of reasons. He said, now I'm in this space, and I see that's where it was in the old sanctuary.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Wow. Again, another moment of transformation, perhaps unintended. Right? That emerged from this. So, let's say an average listener is encountering the vMLK project. What's their experience



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like? Do they strap on one of these now maybe obsolete, I don't know, headsets, virtual reality things? I mean how does this all work? Describe for me what the experience is like.

Derek Ham:

Well, the great thing and I'm going to borrow from my colleague Keon here, the kit of parts as he calls it and as we stick to it, it's developed in a way that can be distributed in multiple ways. And I'll let Dr. Gallagher talk about how it was distributed in the Hunt Library. But from the actual digital content side of it, we produced it in a way that could be distributed straight to a computer screen, straight to a website or if you have a higher end headset, maybe it's a mobile. We could do it on a mobile VR headset. Or if you have even a higher headset, you can do it on a VR. So, that kind of flexibility to create digital content that could be distributed through multiple ways depending upon the scale in which the viewer was able to accommodate this content, that was it in mind. So, it wasn't a one shot fits all. It was something that could meet anybody even sitting at home.

Victoria Gallagher:

Yeah, Keon, why don't you tell him more about the kit of parts and how you develop the different guides for different spaces? And then I'll talk about what a typical experience in Hunt Library is like.

Keon Pettway:

Yeah. So, the kit of parts, it's a term borrowed from graphic design. It's used to understand how experiences are put together. For instance, at the Walker Museum, one of their, I think it was when they did a redevelopment of their brand, they described it as a kit of parts. But a kit of parts is also an architectural term as well. And so, in addition to a kit of parts and how that relates to the project, I used it as kind of a guide to now kind of find other kind of theoretical and conceptual bases that would create such an experience. So, a kit of parts, just as Derek said, you can think about it as a set of Lego blocks. Right? You don't build one big Lego, and one big Lego isn't even all the same color. Right? You build the kind of blocks depending on what you need. It's mobile, it can be transformed into different things and a number of people can participate in it as well. Right? It's not one big block, but other people can actually help you build it. And I think that's also critical to thinking about a kit of parts that in addition to it being a kind of technical term to think about the building, it's also a term about how do you have a collaborative experience with other people. Right? Other folks should be able to take a Lego block, one of those kit of parts and fit it to whatever context. Right? And so, as it relates to the actual project, we thought about—think about arrangement. Right? And how things should be ordered. We knew that the arrangement of this speech and how it could and shouldn't be experienced could not be arranged in one way for a number of reasons. We thought about the fact that everybody is not afforded the same kind of possibility of seeing a speech at Hunt Library. Number one, some people can't get there. Right? If you're in Alabama and coming all the way to NC State, that's not likely. But people also, we



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thought about it in terms of privilege. Right? That a kit of parts addresses the privilege issue, and that is everyone does not have the affordability of coming to NC State at Hunt Library at 12 o'clock in the afternoon. People have to work, and the people are taking care of other people. Right? In a number of other cases. And so, the kit of parts was both a technical way to arrange it, but it was also a way to give nod to the fact that in order to treat these stories with care, we have to think about the privilege that we're afforded and how they impact other people's experience. Right? So, the kit of parts functions as technically. Right? You can view it on the web, you can view it through your mobile device, you can view it in a technical space such as Hunt Library. We've also taken it to other universities and other public spaces, and that's because it's so malleable. Right? What we do is not only relegated to Hunt Library. We can take what we have and fit it to whatever kind of context. And here I would bring up the rhetorical term of in-situ. Right? We would be remiss to say that what we created at NC State University was so magical that it would fit every situation in every single space for X amount of years. we knew that in order to pull this off, we had to create different, number one, modes. You can read it, you can listen to it, you can watch it, you can view it in a PDF. And we also made it possible that other people could take it and put it into their own spaces. So, if you wanted to view the experience in your home, for instance, I'm pretty sure we could package it up for everyone that you could do that too.

Victoria Gallagher:

Yeah. So, I was thinking, Keon, as you were talking. I was so delighted because when we went and showcased the vMLK project at The Smithsonian, The Museum of American History, it was a remarkable thing. We became, our group, the three of us and then all of our awesome colleagues who came and helped us, we designed a museum exhibit with our different kit of parts so that people could experience it in multiple layers. So, they could come up and just pick up viewfinder headsets, and they could just listen to the speech and move around and click around in that very low tech way. They could watch the video. They could listen to the speech. They could go over to computers and be on the gaming platform and move through the recreated digital version of the church and hear the speech or they could fully go into an Oculus Rift and have that whole experience. And they could then give us feedback on iPads or whiteboards or all of these things. So, that kit of parts, we've taken it to The Smithsonian, we've taken it to Milwaukee, taken it to the University of Wisconsin, we've taken it to DePaul, we've taken it to Rochester Institute of Technology. But the primary place that we've done exhibitions is at NC State's Hunt Library, and there, the exhibition is a truly walk-in immersive. You view videos in one place, you go up and you walk into a space, the teaching and visualization lab where the sound is located. And what I mean by that is when you start at the back of the sanctuary, the visual image all around you is of the church on that night, and you see that photographic rendering of being in the church. You start from the back, and you're hearing this sermon, this speech as if you were in the back of the sanctuary. And as you move forward, the sound changes with your body. You're not augmented. You're in the space and the sound is changing. And in the middle, you hear the congregation all



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around you. And then when you go to the front pew or the front row, you hear King right in front of you, and you see this picture, this historic photograph of him. And it's really a remarkable experience for people who get to visit an exhibit of vMLK at Hunt Library, time and time again, they tell us that's the most powerful experience. You're in this space with other people. They don't have a headset on, and yet they have this incredible sound and visual experience with other people that just matters, it transforms them. We've had people say I'm a 40-year-old something male, and I came out of this thinking where would I stand then, where would I be now, what do I need to do? And that kind of transformative language is really something. I have a quote here from one of our students who just did the vMLK experience this Fall although it was completely remote. We did it through the website which I can tell you more about if we have time. But the student basically wrote, "This activity was absolutely amazing to experience. Being put back in time in a place that was not televised, let alone recorded, made me feel like I found a lost piece of history. You can feel the courage and drive that Martin Luther King incited into his audience. Even now decades later, both his message and expression of his message was firm, thorough, and full of heart."

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Wow. And that student's comments lead me to ask about the sort of pedagogical value of the project. I can imagine for those of us who have spent our lives teaching rhetoric and public address how powerful this could be. I'm wondering if you have any experiences of that from a pedagogical perspective beyond the one student you've mentioned? What's the impact that this is having on our next generations?

Victoria Gallagher:

Yeah. So, I'm going to start out, but absolutely, Derek and Keon, please join in as well. I will just say that from the start, we partnered with people in our department here and in our college to make it a pedagogically accessible project. And my main partner originally on that was Dr. Elizabeth Nelson who's our director of COM110 public speaking. And she would teach a unit in her own public speaking class. We didn't do it everywhere. We just started out there. And then I had a colleague in public history who we talked to her, what would that use be like. And then a colleague of ours who does critical media and talked to him about what that might be like. So, like with many of the things, we developed collaboratively just prototyping, trying things out. What does this look like? Since 2015, every single public speaking student at NC State which is about a thousand students per year have a vMLK experience. They either in person go to Hunt Library or in the last two semesters, we've pivoted. Right? To a fully online version where we've done orientations for instructors, helped them think about how to use it, tied it more directly to their activities, done all of these kinds of things to really make it a central unit within the course. And we know from all the data we've collected because we've collected data every semester either through their written responses, their reflections, and/or through survey responses that they have



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an incredibly positive experience of this, that they see it as something that activates within them a sense of comparative what's today like versus what happened then, who am I in relation to that. They identify with the people of the time and bring that forward to think about identifying today. We published the piece in *Communication Education* that goes over one year's worth of data and demonstrates these findings. What we want to do now is think about how does this move through to K through 12 curricula? We're going to do a prototype this Spring with Southeast Raleigh High School to try it out in their English language and social studies curriculum and see how it can meet that. But we're also looking at it in terms of other people at other universities utilizing it. I've used it quite a bit in visual rhetoric. But I want Derek and Keon to have a chance to respond. So, please go ahead, guys.

Derek Ham:

I think the K-12 community is something that we've really learned and talked about early on. Dr. Gallagher talked about taking it over to The Smithsonian, and I remember seeing the engagement of young kids. Think about it. Bringing young kids to a museum and saying let's look at this. And all of a sudden, you give them something that's interactive even if the interactivity is just all about being in immersed space, looking around. We learned right there seeing it that this was a group of people that we could tap in to say, listen, this history is alive, and you could revisit it. And some parents would often mention that they were shocked that their kid wanted to sit and listen to the whole 15-minute speech. I was frankly shocked too. But it's because they were transported. They were there. And so, that was an exciting thing for us to begin to say, wait a second, we should invest a little bit more interest in looking at how this could raise up the next generation and inspire them, something that even the White Rock Baptist Church members mentioned to us about doing. So, I'm very excited to see this project evolve and move towards the K-12 space.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Has there been any discussion with the new National Museum of African-American History about, I don't know, it seems to me you could ramp this up and get a whole set of exhibits. Because as you were talking, Derek, I was struck by the fact I live in Washington DC, and a lot of the museums and The Smithsonian exhibits have worked to move in this more immersive direction. I'm thinking The Museum of the Native American has a lot of sort of immersive moments, and they do work better for younger audiences and younger minds. Any thoughts about bringing history alive? I'd love one of these virtual Demosthenes or something along those lines.

Victoria Gallagher:

Keon, you remember when we were at The Smithsonian, we had gotten folks from actually The Holocaust Museum reached out to us to talk to us about sound. Because they were thinking about incorporating sound more thoroughly throughout their exhibitions in ways that they had simply



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not. And we ended up having a really interesting conversation with them about sound that I know Keon has good things to say about. And I will just say that one of the key people at The Museum of American History has been our advisor and came to our NEH workshop. And we really worked closely with him on thinking about what happens there. Interestingly enough, we have not had contact with The African American Museum even though Phil Freelon's an NC State grad, and I work on another project that features his work. Sadly, he passed away two Springs ago which was a huge and horrible loss for us. But that is a place that we have not yet gone, but I love that you're thinking about that. Because yeah, that would be good. But Keon, talk a little bit about our conversations with folks from other places who are interested in this work if you feel like it.

Keon Pettitway:

Yeah. I remember we had a conversation with a colleague at a museum in Durham, and we also had other conversations with people who, if they were not in the museum profession, they were certainly thinking about along the same lines, Trevor. Why don't we take this to other museums? And I think one of the great possibilities is that number one, you attract so many different people. Right? And so, we think about the vMLK presentation in a museum. It does become a kind of meeting place where a number of different people are all experiencing it together which was something remarkable that happened at NC State. Right? People came into close quarters with one another in one space to listen to a speech that was given in North Carolina by King during the start of the civil rights sit-ins. But even though that's a great possibility and it's another possibility to transform. Right? To think about how the kit of parts works and doesn't work in different spaces. I think one of the limitations, however, is again, how do we think about the significance of space and spatial rhetoric? The fact that, let's say, for instance, the exhibition is given at White Rock Baptist Church has a whole totally different effect than that people experience it at The Smithsonian. Right? And I think what's been so remarkable is that The Smithsonian is such a great place to display it, but it also helps us to think about why is it so important to showcase vMLK as a kit of parts in a particular locale where people live. Right? So, we took vMLK to Rochester, New York. Right? When we went to RIT, we changed up some of the images, and the reason being because we wanted to fit it to the context of where we were in Rochester. When we exhibited in other places, we changed the images. We kind of told the story a little bit differently to kind of fit the context. So, I think that exhibiting it in Smithsonian affords us so many technical possibilities. It affords us a lot in terms of the audience. But I would also say that in addition to showing it at The Smithsonian, there's something really special about continuing to show vMLK in the spaces where it matters to people most.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah. The possibilities for revitalizing the study of rhetoric and public address are endless. I know it takes money and all that. But that's my—



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Keon Pettaway:

But at the same time though, in terms of the money question of this. Right? And to your point, taking it to somewhere like The Smithsonian, vMLK is very efficient in terms of the economics as well. Okay?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Yeah, sure.

Keon Pettaway:

The fact that we created a kit of parts means that we can choose, let's say, if we went to The Smithsonian, we could show everything and do even more. But if we were to take it to a smaller space, a smaller museum, we could take only a few of those parts and make it malleable to that particular locale. And I think that is something that people have asked regarding the sound. Right? If people have a certain sound experience at The Smithsonian, how can you have that same sound experience in a smaller room where you don't get the fullness of King's speech in a kind of 360 degree space? And so, people have wondered how do you have that same sound experience when the space changes? And I think one thing that we try to do even for the audio version is to provide people with different perspectives of the speech. So, even if you are listening at home, we provide an experience where you could feel, you could kind of get a sense of what it was to be at the back of the church or right up where King was speech-ing or with the congregation among everyone else. And we tried to provide visuals. Right? Along with that audio experience. So, as you're listening to the audio as what it would feel like to be in the back, we also provide visual images of what it would look like on that day to be there.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Sure. Well, and you talk about the economies of it all, I mean that's sort of the—if the government, for example, gave the money that they give to scientific research to this kind of digital humanities research, can you imagine the library of virtual projects we could create? That would be amazing. So, yeah, I appreciate both the adaptability but also the economies that you were forced to I suspect implement with regards to the production of this project. One of the things we always like to talk about on the podcast is how—get this, right? See what I do here—how communication matters. And I'm wondering if you might talk a little bit as a sort of final wrap-up of how you believe this project demonstrates the ways in which communication matters both historically, technologically, contemporaneously, etc.? What do we learn from vMLK about the importance of communication in our world?

Victoria Gallagher:

Well, I'm just going to start out, and then again, my colleagues, if you have something you'd like to add, absolutely please do. Because from the start I was looking at this project as a way to



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articulate how rhetoric is transformative, and to be able to recreate that over and over again through this project has been incredible. But it isn't that just this one speech is in its own essence on its own transformative. It's this speech in relation to the community of people that it was given to. Without that community, as Keon always talks about, this is as much about all of the people in Durham and all the people in North Carolina as it is about King. It's called the vMLK project, but it's really the community project that showcases how somebody saying something at the right moment to the right audience can make all the difference. And that's what we see over and over again, that when people experience this, when we do this in this immersive way, and they think about it in relation to this comparative notion of where were they then and I identify them and where am I now and how do I bring this forward, that that is where communication matters and that's where public address matters. And yes, there's all these other factors that come into play. I will say the other piece where I think communication matters is we as communication scholars can help people understand how to develop collaborative teams because this has been a huge collaboration. We have a partner who's a community partner. I have amazing colleagues who contributed. We have people who are constantly bringing things to this project that we say yes to. So, we're invitational, and also, we're collaborative. And I think that communication matters in the sense of how do you create that, how do you keep it going, how do you build those relationships, and how do you move that forward? So, that's my two ways communication matters. But I'll let my colleagues also speak to that.

Derek Ham:

For me, I think about, when you say communication matters, think about the different spheres in which we communicate about history and about things. And I'm always just driven towards my observations of clusters of families coming through the vMLK. The generational conversations that we have between the elders and the next generation, grandparents, parents, and even younger kids is something that if we blink, we might lose these stories. We might lose these discussions. And for us to store them in a digital format for it to be shared forever is great, and I think we just need more people to take these types of measures to store this information and share it in a way that we can have these new conversations cross generationally before these stories are lost.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. That appeals to my inner historian. Keon, anything else about how communication matters here?

Keon Pettway:

Yeah. I would say that communication archives matter. The communication of archives matter. When we started the project, we couldn't find many images of White Rock Baptist Church. We also could not find many images of the speech given on that day. And I think as scholars in



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communication and design, as Derek mentioned earlier, we had to go on kind of a forensic search. And that search revealed the fact that how we communicate those archives both when we do collect archives and then we present them and arrange them, it matters. This is not just a mere showing of archives, a mere showing of artifacts. When we locate the archives, now comes the hard part. How do you present that to people, particularly the community? Right? Those and at White Rock, they contributed some of the archives. Now how do you arrange it? How do you take care of it? How do you be a good steward of it? And how do you invite others to continually contribute to that archive? And I think that's a skill. Right? That I think many of us in communication and design, we have those skills, and I think it matters. Right? Especially in digital humanities. This is not just a mere showing of archives. It matters how it is arranged and how it's presented and how it's taken care of in the entirety of a project. But to that point, I would say that meta critique of communication matters. Just as much as the vMLK project has certainly been transformational for a lot of people who have experienced it, I would also say that vMLK shows the significance of having a digital humanities project as a meta critique of the discipline itself. And not to lose sight of that. Right? Not to lose sight of the fact that what we're building is not a final thing. It's always a recursive process where we're continually critiquing ourselves, critiquing the discipline. A case in point what I would say about for design and communication design, that vMLK was a meta critique of what it means to create collaborative tools. When we reveal to people how we built a lot of the initial format, people were amazed of the low-fi tools we were using. And people would ask why aren't you using some of the industry tools? But what they didn't understand is that this was actually a meta critique, and it was actually a rebuke of those tools that did not allow a lot of other people to collaborate.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's great. I think you all have coined a new sub discipline, if you will, a new subfield, and I'm going to call it rhetorical forensics. I'm really appreciative I think, Keon, of this point that you've made repeatedly about what I might call rhetorical stewardship. I think we've lost some of that, and it's great that you all are blazing a new trail for us in terms of being good stewards of American rhetoric and the public rhetoric that is so important to understanding who we are and where we've been. Thank you all so much for joining me today. This is a great podcast discussion for the MLK holiday coming up in January and for all of 2021. It sets our second year of *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*, off to a great start. So, thanks again for joining us today on *Communication Matters*. Listeners, be sure to check out the vMLK project online. The links will be there on the NCA podcast webpage and experience it for yourselves. It's an amazing project. And thanks as always for listening to *Communication Matters, the NCA podcast*.

[Audio clip] Martin Luther King, Jr.:

And one day, historians in this era might be able to say, there lived the great people, a black people who injected a new meaning into civilization.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

In NCA news, NCA's publications council is seeking applications for editors elect for six journals including the newly named *Communication and Democracy* which used to be titled *First Amendment Studies*. New editors will begin processing manuscripts in late 2021 or early 2022. Nominations must be submitted by January 31st, 2021. Visit the NCA website to view the specific calls. Also, in NCA news, submissions for NCA's 107th Annual Convention are now open. The convention will be held November 18th through the 21st, 2021 in Seattle, Washington under the theme Renewal and Transformation. The theme focuses on how we can engage in the essential tasks of restoration and change. The COVID-19 pandemic, economic strife, political turmoil, and struggles for racial justice challenge us as communication scholars, teachers, and professionals to consider why our contributions matter more than ever before. Read the full call for this year's convention at natcom.org/convention and complete your submission by March 31st, 2021 at 11:59 PM Pacific Standard Time. And listeners, I hope you'll tune in for the next episode of *Communication Matters* on January 28th when we'll focus on some of the historical inaugural addresses from American history as well as President-Elect Joe Biden's inaugural address and swearing-in ceremony. I'll be joined by Professor Stephen Brown, John Murphy, and Allison Prasch to talk about these important historical events on this special episode of *Communication Matters*.

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.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

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.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles. The podcast, organized at the national office in downtown Washington DC, is produced by Assistant Director of External Affairs and Publications 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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