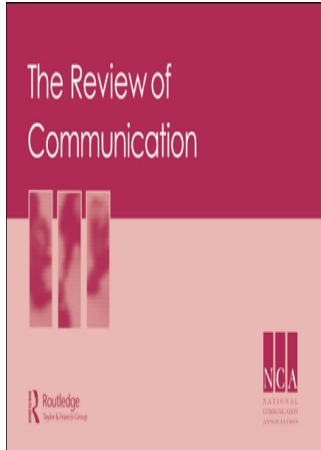


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# Remembering “Memory,” Part II: A Rhetorical Commentary on an Institutional Keyword in Communication Studies

Jeffrey St. John & Todd Kelshaw

*In an earlier paper we considered “how the emergence and epistemological performance of ‘memory’ across the discipline not only illuminates important fault lines but also reveals fertile sites of multiplicity.” In this essay, we seek in the end to demonstrate how the meaning(s) of “memory”—as a keyword in communication organizations and as a signifier of the (un)remembered disciplinary history of communication studies—have not received nearly enough attention for their effects on current communication theory and praxis.*

*Keywords: Memory; Communication Studies; Communication Departments  
Disciplinary History*

In a previous essay (Kelshaw & St. John, 2007) in the pages of this journal, we made three claims about the emergence, uses, and reception of “memory” as a keyword in communication studies. There we wrote:

The first [move] lays some expository groundwork concerning the emergent and contemporary American communication discipline as an organization, with complex systemic and cultural features that are both reflected and made (at least in part) by its vocabulary. We then look to “memory” as a particular institutional keyword that has taken different forms over time and across purposes. As the large body of scholarly writing about “memory” illustrates, the term is applied in ways that illuminate and maintain significant epistemological distinctions, with real consequences not only for the term’s conceptual significance but also for communication scholars’ evolving identities. This recognition is the basis of the

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essay's subsequent discussion, which considers how the emergence and epistemological performance of "memory" across the discipline not only illuminates important fault lines but also reveals fertile sites of multiplicity. (Kelshaw & St. John, 2007, p. 47)

One of the conclusions we drew about those "fertile sites of multiplicity" is that they tend to function *organizationally* with a considerable degree of independence from one another. A less laudatory way of saying the same thing is to suggest that "memory" has few if any broadly recognized governing definitions within and among the many organizations— departments, colleges, research institutes, and the like—that comprise the discipline of communication studies. Although such a claim cannot be tested empirically, we do not believe it would exceed credulity to argue that no term applied so widely and frequently in contemporary communication studies has a less coherent set of definitions attached to it than does "memory." On our view, "memory" is unique in possessing a conceptual attractiveness belied by a dearth of definitional rigor manifested in its ordinary use. In effect, the strange operation of "memory" appears to amount to this: One may choose from untold senses or connotations; one may apply one or many of those senses or connotations once or many times in a variety of organizational settings; and one may, so far as we can determine, stand unchallenged by claims that the meanings of "memory" are unclear to one's auditors.

If that is our view of "memory" in and for communication-related organizations, what then remains to be argued? Why try to assign particular salience to a keyword whose applications are evidently unlimited? The answer is this: We think the *rhetorical* lineage of the absence of definitional (and consequently, conceptual) coherence for "memory" as an institutional keyword is worth tracing. What, for instance, does it mean to claim that "memory" operates within multiple organizational sites in communication studies without having achieved stable definitions of itself? How can a word that potentially means something different to each distinct constituency have such an abiding presence across the operative gaps that separate sites of communication inquiry and practice? Our chief source for tracing this lineage is the work of several contemporary communication theorists whose focus is the history of the discipline. What they have variously discovered, and the degree to which we believe their discoveries rhetorically reinforce our prior description of what should be a crisis of confidence over "memory," are the present essay's main subjects and our best source of answers to the questions posed above. We seek in the end to demonstrate how the meaning(s) of "memory"—as a keyword in communication organizations *and* as a signifier of the (un)remembered disciplinary history of communication studies—have not received nearly enough attention for their effects on current communication theory and praxis.

### Fragmentation and Fracture

Writing in 1987, Jesse G. Delia commences a careful review of the history of communication research by offering a pair of candid and connected caveats. The first

is this: "Until recently," he observes, "there has been almost no serious scholarship on the history of communication study itself" (p. 20). Why? Quite possibly "because it has only been in the past 35 years or so that the field has begun to be well enough defined to be seen as having its own history" (p. 20). As a realm of social-scientific inquiry whose disciplinary configuration only took on formal shape in the mid- to late 1940s, "communication research" could perhaps not have been expected to dress (much less recognize itself) in any distinctive garb a mere forty years into its enterprise. Later in this essay we take advantage of the twenty years since the publication of Delia's essay to consider whether the research now conducted, and institutional practices now enacted, in what we call "communication studies" have grown any more refined in their embodying of communication as a specific mode of professional, organizational activity.

The second caveat Delia offers is probably unintended, but it is no less compelling for being so. Reviewing then-recent scholarship in the history of research in and around communication, he criticizes that work for its collective failure to paint communication, as a site of theory and as a reflection of praxis, in its true colors, which for Delia are those of *fragmentation* and *fracture*. Indeed, he uses some variant of those words three times in the first three pages of his essay. For Delia, what we term the "field" of communication research is in many respects better understood as an eclectic and ersatz collection of theories, postulates, and practices. Even those lines of inquiry that have hugged the shores of topically narrow strands of empirical research have proven to be "fragmented, scattered, and largely unconnected. Each medium [has] generated its own cadre of researchers as it [has] emerged"—researchers whose understandings of the tenets, scope, foci, assessment, and application(s) of communication inquiry have had no necessary kinship to anyone else's understanding of the same (p. 22).

In our view, the reasons for communication research's lack of disciplinary *integrity*, in the physical, not the ethical, sense, are less important than are the pragmatic outworkings of fragmentation and fracture in the institutional praxis of communication departments, colleges, institutes, and conferences. It is our claim that those outworkings are organizationally salient in any number of ways, not least of which is communication researchers' ostensible blindness to the paucity of institutional memory as evinced by their professional habitats. To recapitulate our initial claim: We treat the lack of memory within communication *qua* organizations as a subject of rhetorical appraisal, specifically as one whose central artifact is distinguished by its absence from the scene of its own putatively suasive action. In other words, we claim that "memory" in communication institutions operates as an absent presence, an illness of definition whose treatment is elusive for no surer reason than that the agent (memory) symptomatic of the ailment (disciplinary incoherence) is nowhere to be found in organizational discourse itself.

While we claim above that the reasons behind the absence of "memory" as an outgrowth of institutional incoherence are not our focus, we nonetheless assert that those reasons are not recondite. As Delia, John Durham Peters, Everett M. Rogers, Robert T. Craig, and other historians of the discipline have shown, two causes are

most to blame for the extent of the fragmentation Delia describes. The first is the splitting of mass communication and interpersonal communication into disconnected bodies of research activity in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The second is the subsequent assignment of those content areas to separate and generally unaffiliated departments of study. The effects of these twin schisms on research were grievous:

Communication research . . . was consolidated on terms that identified communication research primarily with mass communication, thereby driving a wedge between studies of public and interpersonal communication. The divorce of mass communication and interpersonal communication restricted access to concepts of language and sociality that are foundational to communication and precluded the development of viable general and comparative frameworks for investigating communication. . . . The separation of interpersonal and mass communication was continued with the movements of communication research into journalism and speech departments, which were themselves already founded on the separation. . . . [T]his separation continues to hinder both theoretical developments in the field and its evolution toward disciplinary status. (Delia, 1987, p. 72)

Worse still has been the long-term thwarting of the discipline's quest for intellectual legitimacy in the eyes of its academic peers in the social sciences and humanities. When two formerly conjoined bodies of inquiry (like mass communication and interpersonal communication) are shorn of most of their intellectual and praxical linkages, one is left with an image of the right leg calling across the room to the left to ask whether the two might get together and go for a walk. As Delia (1987) puts it: "Was the field interdisciplinary or autonomous; and if autonomous, on what terms? Communication study in the late 1940s embraced divergent and contradictory attitudes that leave this question unresolved" (p. 72).

### **Communication . . . and Rhetoric**

Those "divergent and contradictory attitudes" are neatly illustrated in Everett Rogers' (1994) account of Wilbur Schramm's founding of "communication study" at the University of Illinois in 1947. Contemporary practitioners of communication research, those housed in departments or schools of "communication studies," may be interested to learn that rhetoric was at first left entirely out of the equation. Already a functional academic unit in its own right, the university's Department of Speech decided that it shared so little substantive and perspectival ground with Schramm's social-scientifically driven agenda for the new Division of Communication that the speech faculty turned down an offer to merge with the latter program (p. 450). The gap between social-scientific and rhetorical-humanist visions of communication research was a contributing factor in Schramm's departure for Stanford in 1970.

Although Rogers follows with several more anecdotes highlighting the same sorts of disjunctions, he concludes his essay on Schramm in an optimistic key, recapitulating Schramm's belief that a probable consolidation of mass communication, interpersonal communication, journalism, speech communication, information

science, and similar departments under the simple heading of “communication” would be useful because it would mean that:

[T]he past division of communication-related units on the basis of communication channel (print, film, interpersonal, etc.) and the media industry that stands behind each type of communication channel [would] be deemphasized in favor of an intellectual unity around the core paradigm of communication study. (1994, p. 494)

Although a number of unsupported suppositions are embedded in that claim, the best rebuttal to it comes from evidence supplied in our earlier essay. There we named and outlined three orientations to “memory” in communication research: the cognitive/psychological perspective, the interactive/relational perspective, and the public/cultural discourse-oriented perspective (Kelshaw & St. John, 2007, p. 51). Encountering within each perspective (and across all three) an idiosyncratic array of conceptualizations, definitions, and applications of “memory,” we were left to assert that the term has no universally acknowledged meaning or set of meanings in communication research. “Memory’ across the communication discipline,” we wrote, “is both a sign and drawer of boundaries. Its degrees of casualness and imprecision signal invokers’ provincialism, myopia, and, worse, ethnocentrism.” We ended with the only conclusion about “memory” afforded us by the evidence at hand: “Its rise and fall as a prominent term across different orientations . . . manifests and fuels the discipline’s paradigmatic struggles” (p. 64).

### Real Estate Metaphors

Robert T. Craig (2003) betrays few qualms about confronting the discipline’s struggles for what they are and what they have produced. Writing of academic disciplines generally, Craig notes that they tend to employ “real estate metaphors” in their efforts to articulate the shape and limits of various conceptual terrains. Many of these metaphors reflect choices that are necessarily arbitrary (p. 2). Craig concedes that academic disciplines come into being as concretized products of the talk that shapes them; they “emerge, evolve, transform, and dissipate in the discourse of disciplines” (p. 2). In this way, their creation is far more haphazard and intellectually passive than most members of communication organizations might imagine.

What we find especially refreshing in Craig’s argument is his willingness to call communication *qua* organization to account for its overt concern for form over substance. Communication studies may look like any other academic discipline, Craig observes, but “as an intellectual tradition” it has been unhelpfully exotic: it is “radically heterogeneous and largely derivative” (2003, p. 4). Part of the root problem is structural: Academic units enjoy the “aura” (Craig’s term) surrounding descriptors such as “discipline” and “field.” Unwittingly, however, organizations may find themselves defined more by their structure than by their intellectual content (pp. 4–5).

In one crucial respect, Craig's view of the long-term health of communication organizations diverges from our own. In discussing the ways in which organizations have been reduced to offering audible justifications for their own existence, he writes:

When, as in the case of communication, the institutional development of a discipline, driven by cultural and economic forces, has outrun its intellectual development, then . . . rhetorical studies may have a primarily hermeneutical task, not to show how these factors have contaminated or distorted knowledge, but rather to clarify the intellectual significance of the institutional formation. (p. 13)

Craig offers almost no further comment on this subject. We wish he had. We are troubled by the implication (one whose sources we obviously do not place at Craig's doorstep) that it might be useful for communication scholars to spend time explaining to external parties why they exist, organizationally, in the forms in which they do. (It is worth noting that the themes chosen for the National Communication Association's annual convention are more often than not existentially self-conscious in precisely this way—as opposed to being focused on the substance of the research and teaching the organization's members have gathered to discuss.)

In another vein, Craig's argument stresses the need for what is practical. He aspires to a state of disciplinary affairs in which communication's being is inextricable from its doing (2003, p. 18). But in the very next sentence, he would have us believe that the best first step toward becoming good at doing would be for communication studies to "find its voice in the conversation of the disciplines" (p. 18). It is difficult to understand how more talk about who communication scholars are and how they function in their respective organizations might promote an escape from the loop of talk in which they already find themselves. Craig yearns for a discipline that *does* escape, but can imagine no form that doing so would take which would itself not fundamentally involve talking. "Disciplinary coherence," he argues, at the end of his call for a new practicality, "is . . . a hermeneutical problem" (p. 18). If that is true, how then is communication ever to slip the bonds of its own discourse? And if it somehow did so, would we still be writing about *communication*, or something else? In the main, Craig's perspective on the discipline's legitimation crisis is insightful, but we must dissent from a depiction of communication studies as primarily hermeneutical. We think we may either principally *do* or principally talk about what we *would do* if we knew who we were, in an organizational sense. We cannot do both.

### A History of the Idea of Communication

In *Speaking into the Air*, John Durham Peters (1999) opens with a question about communication which frames everything that follows: "How did a term once associated with successful transmission by telegraph, telephone, or radio come to carry the political and intimate aspirations of so many people in this age?" (p. 2). He answers that query in the succeeding sentence, and then devotes the remainder of a

272-page text to proving its validity: “Only moderns could be facing each other and be worried about ‘communicating’ as if they were a thousand miles apart” (p. 2). The unique maladies of modern life, Peters argues, have produced a state of affairs in which the oldest and most elemental mode of human communication—face-to-face speech—has been transmuted into something obscure, mysterious, and remote from our experience. The contemporary paradox of human communication is, for Peters, reflected at least in part by the fact that we “moderns” have more means of communicating available to us than any other humans in the history of the world—yet we appear to ourselves to be less successful than ever before in managing to say anything at all.

Readers familiar with Peters’ book might object that *Speaking into the Air* is not mainly addressed to questions of “memory.” While accurate, that objection would miss the flavor of a main undercurrent in Peters’ argument. A theme to which Peters returns obsessively throughout the book is the balancing of human communicative interests as embodied in technical modalities. Radio, telephone, the spiritualist movement, science’s attempts to “talk” with animals and aliens: each realm of communication sends a different set of signals through a different medium; each medium is housed in a particular form; and each form in turn reflects the labors of technicians of communication working in or at various organizational sites. Here is an example of Peters’ concern for such balancing from a passage in which he discusses the rise of mass society in relation to broadcasting:

Today both the programming and reception of most commercial media, in the United States at least, actively cultivates a sense of intimate relations between persona and audience. Media culture is a lush jungle of fictional worlds where “everyone knows your name,” celebrities and politicians address audiences by first names, and conversational formats proliferate. The conventional concept of “mass communication” captures only the abstract potential for alienation in large-scale message systems, not the multiple tactics of interpersonal appeal that have evolved to counter it. Early broadcasters saw “mass society” looming and tried to stop it. (1999, p. 217)

Agreement or disagreement with the claim above and others like it is contingent on a working knowledge of the history of communication media in the United States. To lack the historical contexts that gave rise to those media is to lack a footing on which to make informed judgments about their greater or lesser effects on communication. This premise lurks everywhere in Peters’ book, one whose subtitle, appropriately enough, is *A History of the Idea of Communication*. Without the memory that an organization’s history affords, critical assessment is extraordinarily difficult to achieve. In the same respect, the establishing of clear, shared definitions of “memory” within organizations establishes a groundwork for forging and circulating coherent meanings of and about institutional concepts, institutional practices, and the communication whose task it is to bridge them.



## Conclusion

Paradoxically, but crucially, the gaps between the intellectual and praxical positions staked out by various tribes within the organizational world of communication inquiry lay bare the absence of governing definitions of the keyword "memory." And while those gaps are not necessarily intended, and may be the result of unconscious and unplanned intellectual drifting on the part of persons or schools of researchers, there remains a specific ideological element at work here. For just as academics participate in organizational cultures and are thus creators of institutional history, so too does the acceptance of certain narratives of remembrance reflect the ideological commitments of the persons being remembered and doing the remembering.

In the final analysis, we wish to stress our belief that there is nothing wrong with uncertainty in and of itself, *to a degree*. As James Boyd White (1985) has observed, the producing of rhetorical forms of knowledge is intimately bound up with a real failure to define one's terms in all kinds of constructive ways. Rhetorical knowledge "is allied with artistic knowledge," White claims, "in that it is tacitly creative and acknowledges both its limits and the conditions of uncertainty under which it functions" (p. 44). Craig similarly opines: "Absolute coherence is neither possible nor desirable" (2003, p. 10). Lacking any room for uncertainty—and, consequently, for change—institutions and the keywords in which they think, move, and barter must eventually perish. Words are defined against themselves in all sorts of productive ways, and indeed cannot function organizationally if shades of meaning are not permitted. "It is the nature of rhetoric," argues J.G.A. Pocock (1971), whose subject was political formations but might have been organizational formations, "that the same utterance will simultaneously perform a diversity of linguistic functions" (p. 17).

To a certain extent, then, ambiguity is oxygen; without it, innovations wither on the vine. Conversely, however, an organization on whose stage each player uses the same term with no sense of its having the same meaning(s) for any other player must prove at best risible and at worst fatal—and in more than one sense. A parallel set of tracks run through the absence of "memory" in communication studies. One track is the literal absence of memory about the rise and development of communication as organization(s). The other is the conceptual absence of guiding definitions of "memory" within organizations. Each track has birthed a type of presence whose meanings are simply unknown insofar as any measurable definitional clarity is concerned. Together, these tracks put "communication studies" on what can best be described as a path of ignorance. Not comprehending where it came from, and not comprehending what it means by the terms of its own intellectual commerce, who knows where that path may lead the many organizations that comprise the discipline of communication studies? At present, we must conclude that the institutional and definitional confusions over "memory" as revealed by the organizational history and involuted talk of the discipline's constituents render the question largely unanswerable.

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