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Trends in Organizational Communication Research: Sustaining the Discipline, Sustaining Ourselves

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Trends in Organizational Communication Research: Sustaining the Discipline, Sustaining Ourselves

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Abstract
This paper began as a keynote address delivered at the 16th annual Organizational Communication Mini-Conference hosted by Western Michigan University. In it, I identify topical trends in organizational communication research, noting ways in which these trends are flexible, enduring, diverse, and problem-centered. I go on to invite current doctoral students to join us in developing these trends further. Specifically, I discuss how we might engage research in ways that sustain the vitality of the discipline as well as our own personal vitality. I conclude by offering a list of key articles that could serve as starting points in the ongoing conversation centered around organizational communication.

Keywords: organizational communication, research trends, disciplinary vitality, personal vitality

Before I begin my remarks today, please join me in thanking Steve Rhodes and the faculty and graduate students of the Department of Communication here at Western Michigan University for their hard work in hosting the 16th annual Organizational Communication mini-conference. We appreciate the leadership you are providing for organizational communication studies.

It doesn't seem all that long ago when I was positioned on the other side of this podium; sitting there, in your shoes, listening to Charles Redding urge us to examine unethical messages in our organizational communication research (see Redding, 1996), and to include "boat-rocking and whistleblowing" in our organizational communication instruction (Redding, 1985). It *was* a long time ago, though, in the early '80s, actually, when I began studying

organizational communication at the University of Texas (UT). At the time, organizational communication was, in some ways, the "new kid on the academic block," and its identity as an academic subdiscipline was still taking shape. This was both inviting and unsettling: inviting, in the sense that, even as graduate students, we might somehow be able to help shape the field's identity, but also unsettling in the sense that even then, we had several paradigmatic alternatives from which to choose in shaping our own identity as organizational communication scholars. As graduate students at UT at that time, we were fortunate to have exposure to positivist approaches to research through our work with Fred Jablin, and what we then called "qualitative approaches" through our work with Larry Browning. Then, one semester while Larry was on sabbatical, Stan Deetz visited our department and broadened our graduate curriculum even further by introducing us to critical organizational communication studies. Quite honestly, I struggled to get my mind around the language of positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory all at the same time—multivariate analysis of variance—ideological critique; factor analysis—deconstruction. These are not particularly compatible discourses! While the experience was overwhelming at times, even then I think I was beginning to sense that organizations and communication are complex and rich enough to be usefully understood in multiple and diverse ways.

Now, many years later, and having had much more time to read research conducted across those paradigmatic traditions, I am even more appreciative of the array of diverse choices available to us as organizational communication scholars. I also am somewhat amazed that my early path happened to intersect with some of the best minds in the field—each working in his own way, shaping and defining this complex and mysterious subject: "organizational communication." At the time, Fred was providing leadership for research and theorizing in organizational socialization. Larry was involved in the first Alta conference and the early movement toward interpretive studies of organizational communication. And Stan was on his way to becoming one of the founding "fathers" of critical organizational communication theory and research.

As it turns out, I had arrived right in an epicenter of multiple emerging trends in organizational communication research. It was an exciting place to be. Even though I was a fledgling scholar, I was able to coauthor several papers with Fred who, at the time, probably was *the* driving force behind communication research in organizational socialization. Graduate students in the department then were required to complete an independent research project with a faculty member other than their primary advisor. So, with the guidance of Larry Browning, I completed an interpretive study on balancing power in supervisory relationships. Looking back now on those experiences, I can see how they began my integration in to the discipline. As a result of my experiences as a graduate student, I also felt somehow *welcomed* into the discipline, an experience that I now try to offer my own doctoral advisees. My purpose today is to extend that welcome along to you; to invite you further in to this academic community centered on unraveling the mysteries of organizational communication. For indeed, the brightness and vitality of our disciplinary future depends, to some extent, on each of you!

Trends in Organizational Communication Research

In preparing my talk on trends in organizational communication research, I began by simply wondering about what some of those might be, based on my own work, my professional involvements in the Organizational Communication Divisions of the National Communication Association and the International Communication Association, and claims that I hear bandied about among my colleagues both near and far. But then, given the formality of this occasion, my own curiosity, and the fact that Western Michigan University graciously paid my way here, I decided to do a more systematic review of current trends in organizational communication research. I reviewed publications that appeared between 2001 and 2003 in our "big four" journals: *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Communication Monographs*, and *Human Communication Research*. I began this task with my jaw firmly set, and an attitude of focused determination—yet another task to accomplish on my long list of things to do. In addition, at some level I was bracing myself for what I would find. Would the results of my search reinforce the perceptions of our more skeptical colleagues who worried that, over the years, the importation of critical theory would operate as a cancerous growth, choking off the promise of post-positivist organizational communication research? Would I find that post-positivist research is "dead" (at its best) or had become "evil" (at its worst)? Would I find evidence that might help or hinder my various attempts to "defend" the worth of what we do, and to continue arguing for additional university support for our work? Again it was with some mixture of determination and apprehension that I began my task, three years of *Management Communication Quarterly* stacked in front of me. As I quickly scanned the table of contents of those 12 issues, however, an unmistakable shift in my orientation to this project began to occur. I quickly felt my heart and mind becoming engaged in a more meaningful way. This, I said to myself, is why I study and teach organizational communication. I was reminded of why I was drawn to organizational communication studies in the first place, why, despite a fair amount of adversity, I remain an organizational communication scholar to this day, and why you might want to be one too. Here is some of what I found.

By far, the largest concentration of studies focused on exploring relationships between communication and a variety of alternative organizational forms. These included such interesting configurations as team-based organizing, knowledge-based organizing, self-organizing, democratic and cooperative organizing, feminist organizing, community organizing, multinational collaborations such as international joint ventures, and even interrelationships among nongovernmental organizations as a route to nation building in second and third world countries. Organizational communication research is addressing ever more complex and novel organizational forms. Pretty interesting, and consistent with how Mumby and Stohl (1996) have characterized the identity of organizational communication scholars. In contrast to scholars from related disciplines such as managerial or business communication, we're particularly likely to be drawn to the study of communicatively complex (i.e., interesting) organizational forms that challenge traditional conceptions of organizing and

the traditional separations between organizations and societies. Organizational communication scholars continue to be drawn to explanations of ways in which society, culture, organizations, and communication are entwined.

The second largest concentration of studies I found was exploring the emotional dimension of organizational life. Given the catastrophic events of 9/11, the recent loss of the space shuttle *Columbia*, and the steady stream of incidents of workplace violence, what could be more relevant than to explore the experience and expression of emotion during the aftermath of a major tragedy? Kathy Miller (2002) gives us a compelling example of this in her autoethnography of professing in the midst of the bonfire tragedy at Texas A&M University. What could be more relevant and socially useful than to learn more about the emotions of job loss, or about how the day-to-day emotional life of organizations is shaped by "troubled supervisors and co-workers," or cycles of emotional and verbal abuse? Less dramatic but perhaps equally important to the quality of our day-to-day working lives is to be learning more about the role of emotion in the construction of community in the workplace (Shuler & Sypher, 2000), the constraints involved in negotiating organizational or occupational feeling rules (Morgan & Krone, 2001), or learning that not only are organizational *rationalities* multiple, but that so too, are organizational *emotionalities* (e.g., Krone & Morgan, 2000)? Organizational communication scholars are giving voice to the emotional texture of organizational life. How organizations construct, communicate, and control work feelings are not just relevant to the overall quality of work life, although they certainly are that, but also to whether organizations will realize their capacity for great good or great harm. Organizational communication scholars are well positioned to help explain how.

Our field's ongoing interest in what Mumby and Stohl (1996) have called the problematic of voice was reflected in a cluster of studies related to diversity and intercultural, cocultural, and multicultural organizational communication, employee dissent, and research inspired by theories of feminism and, more recently, of masculinity. Organizational communication researchers are concentrating more and more energy on exploring the boundaries of work and family life exploring such issues as communication and the structuration of work-family practices, and the ways in which employee and supervisory discourse about work-family policies actually discourages their use (Kirby & Krone, 2002).

I found additional clusters of studies addressing a range of compelling organizational communication challenges and dilemmas including discourses of renewal following organizational crises, communicating planned and unplanned change, and the unintended consequences produced by successive organizational downsizings. I found studies problematizing the communication dynamics of emerging forms of work such as "temping," and the ascendancy of technical work. Communication issues related to technology remain a steady focus of research: discourses of telecommuting, user understandings of group decision support systems, and media choices made by organizations in a variety of situations.

Research also continues to cluster around discourses of employee identity and organizational identification. In the first case, research is demonstrating the fluidity of gendered work identities. In the second case, what was old becomes new again as studies demonstrate the shifting meanings of organizational identification in our current economic era and under the terms of the "new social contract."

A series of discussion forums appeared in *Management Communication Quarterly* highlighting a number of compelling issues for organizational communication scholars. Recent topics reinforce the field's commitment to "practical" theorizing through a series of exchanges on the use of communication audits and ways to improve translations of organizational communication theory to practice. The *Journal of Applied Communication Research* shares this commitment to further developing teaching, training, and consulting practices via insights gained from organizational communication research. And, perhaps in the spirit of boat-rocking and whistle-blowing called for early on by Charles Redding (1985), the field's founding values continue to be reflected in *Management Communication Quarterly* forum discussions devoted to teaching business ethically and to critically reflecting on the discourses of corporate and social responsibility.

Commentary on Trends

How are we to interpret the topical trends emerging in this sample of organizational communication publications? Based on my quick review, trends in organizational communication research appear to be *flexible*, *enduring*, *diverse*, and *problem centered*.

Organizational communication research trends are *flexible* in that the field remains open to shifts in research directions necessitated by rapid change in organizational forms and new understandings of communication problematics. For the most part, organizational communication research is timely and responsive to feedback concerning its practical and theoretical limitations. The discipline's research is not narrowly or parochially defined by a small group of scholars seeking to maintain rigid control over our disciplinary boundaries. This bodes well for you, and your ability to initiate trends as relative newcomers to the discipline.

Second, in addition to being timely and flexible, organizational communication research trends also are, in a sense, timeless, and *enduring*. Previous organizational communication "trends" are becoming further developed by research that pushes their conceptual and theoretical boundaries. I responded to a very interesting panel of papers at the most recent meeting of the Central States Communication Association in which a group of recent doctoral students from Purdue were reconceptualizing organizational socialization research by creatively exploring the boundaries between work and life, and illuminating the emergence of boundaryless socialization. Current research continues to develop our understandings of organizational identification by questioning its very meaning in an age of the temporary worker, and the reality of multiple and shifting points of identification. Research concerning organizational socialization and identification endures and evolves because it is theorizing about fundamentally important, even universal, human experiences and organizational communication processes.

A hallmark feature of organizational communication studies has been our philosophical, theoretical, and methodological pluralism; and recent topical trends continue to reflect this *diversity*. Perhaps this is because some of the most consequential problems in and around organizations today are complex and intractable enough to require study using a variety of methodological approaches. Certainly, the emotional textures of organizational life, for example, are rich and complex enough to be understood in multiple ways as reflected in recent research in this area.

Having said this though, there is a marked concentration of studies operating beyond the conduit and lens metaphors of organizational communication research, particularly what Putnam and her co-authors would characterize as metaphors of performance, symbol, voice, and especially discourse (Putnam, Phillips & Chapman, 1996). Studies of organizational discourses of renewal and downsizing, and employee discourses of health, safety, or job loss provide fresh insights into "old," persistent problems. At the same time, we have post-positivists designing new ways to study organizations as complex discursive systems, while others are examining how networks of interorganizational relationships contribute to nation building. Organizational communication studies clearly are maintaining the field's commitment to methodological diversity.

Fourth, organizational communication studies are *problem centered*. Our research is developing in ways that better capture the communicative complexity of social systems and the contradictions, tensions, and dilemmas they produce. Our practical efforts to improve the quality of employee participation, for instance, or to improve the quality of work life, will always be enabled and constrained by the systems in which they are embedded. Recognizing the contradictions and unintended consequences of these efforts can lead to creative developments in theorizing as well as in quality of work life initiatives.

Because organizational communication studies are problem centered, they are closely aligned with the vision of engaged communication scholarship advanced by Jim Applegate (e.g., Applegate, 2002). Many studies appear designed to serve local, or in some cases, global communities. Those that aren't, in many cases, are just a few conceptual translations away from being socially useful, and thus, increasingly likely to be fundable by external granting agencies.

The nature of trends in organizational communication research suggests a bright future, indeed, but we are working in an era of increasing institutional demands and decreasing resources. Thus, we need to be mindful of sustainability—for the discipline and for ourselves.

Sustaining the Discipline

We can sustain organizational communication studies by cultivating our inner and outer resources as a discipline. Within organizational communication studies we are operating from an enlarged frame of reference compared to some of our colleagues in other subdisciplines of communication and in management departments. Most of us are aware of the multiple paradigms driving organizational communication research and of the types of knowledge each constructs. Some of us routinely organize graduate seminars around specific topics that we then go on to explore and illustrate through the use of research rooted in multiple perspectives. If we are fortunate enough, we even work side by side with colleagues operating within these multiple discourses. This plurality of discourses can be fragmenting and divisive at its worse, but it also can be a source of disciplinary inner strength and renewal. In my chapter in Corman and Poole's (2000) *Perspectives on Organizational Communication* I argue for an attitudinal ideal of "deep multiperspectivalism" among organizational communication scholars (Krone, 2000). We become "deep" not by

trying to conduct research across each of the paradigms ourselves. Even if we had the ability to do so, few of us would have the time to develop the necessary skills. The attitudinal ideal of "deep multiperspectivalism" is in some ways much simpler, but also more profound. Such an attitude invites us into relationship with organizational communication as a subject—one that continually calls us deeper into its mysteries, some of which can never be fully named or understood (see Palmer, 1998). Conceived of as subject (rather than object), the nature of organizational communication will refuse to let us, or our research perspectives reduce it to simple or final conclusions.

By becoming "deep" we can come to understand organizational communication as embodying what Rilke refers to as "the grace of great things." Because it is both graceful and great, the subject of organizational communication will continually call us to gather around it, but it will actively resist our attempts to contain it with premature or partial explanations. As subject, organizational communication commands our respect and demands to be approached through multiple perspectives. But even these will be inadequate to fully understand its mysteries. As subject, organizational communication continues to correct us in our sometimes clumsy attempts to understand it, and requires that we make ourselves vulnerable as we remain open to its yet unknown revelations. Because of this vulnerability, an attitude of "deep multiperspectivalism" is best practiced within a supportive community. Parker Palmer, in his book *The Courage to Teach*, suggests we think of these as "pluralistic communities of truth." In these, our subject remains at the center of our attention, calling us in all of our diversity to gather around it, enlarging our collective frame of reference as we go. Truth in this sense, is not the final word, rather, as Palmer suggests it is "an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" (1998, p. 104). We need to create more time and space in which to construct this "eternal conversation" for it can be a source of our disciplinary strength. These conversations most likely will not lead to consensus on our "subject." Rather, through them, we may learn that all we have in common is our passion for this "great and graceful" subject. But perhaps that will be enough to serve as a basis for unification and solidarity among us. While we sometimes exist in uneasy relationship with each other, when these dynamic tensions are revealed in a community of truth, they also can be the source of creative thinking concerning some of the most compelling communication problems facing organizations today.

Cultivating our inner resources as a field, though, will not be enough to sustain us. We need to look outward as well and cultivate external support for our efforts. This may require that we concentrate our resources in those places with the greatest "payoffs." As suggested by my brief overview of topical trends, there is no shortage of compelling problems and ideas. There still is though a shortage of organizational communication scholars to meet the demand for our courses and the promise of our research. We need to focus our energies in those areas that visibly demonstrate our best value to the various communities in which we are embedded, and that might lead to continued opportunities for growth in our funding. Problem-centered organizational communication research is a good place to begin. If you are seeking a job in a research extensive or intensive institution, if you haven't done so already, you might begin exploring the availability of external support for your research. I found the special forum on funded research in communication that appeared

in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* in November 2002 particularly helpful along these lines. The collection of papers addresses several different sources of funding including federal and private funding, as well as the joys and sorrows of seeking funding through large, interdisciplinary collaborations (e.g., Biocca & Biocca, 2002).

You might also see the recent announcement circulated on CRNET regarding the new NSF Priority Area in Human and Social Dynamics. Thanks to the efforts of Scott Poole and colleagues, NSF is becoming more aware of how communication research can inform problems of concern to them—reading from version 1.6 of the announcement:

> refine our knowledge of decision-making, risk, and uncertainty, and learn how to translate this knowledge into improved decision making and risk communication, develop a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach to understanding human and social dynamics, incorporating international, regional, and cross-cultural approaches.

Seriously pursuing these opportunities will require that we work differently than how many of us do now, and also that we teach others to see us differently. Communication Studies Departments always will be valuable to their colleges and universities because of the large numbers of students we teach, but university officials will need to learn that we do much more than teach. And we are the ones who will need to provide the instruction. In the meantime, we can begin testing the waters of funded research simply by carving out research space in fundable areas and, as Applegate suggests, being ready in the event that conditions become more supportive of our efforts.

Sustaining Ourselves

If we sustain the discipline but lose ourselves we will have paid far too high a price for our efforts. We must do both, and it is possible to do both if we think of our teaching and research as sites for both personal and professional development. The attitudinal ideal of "multiperspectivalism" can guide us here as well. As organizational communication scholars, we have considerable freedom to choose what and how we will research and teach. We need to make these choices mindfully because what we choose to emphasize and exclude in our studies and in our teaching are something more than power moves or professional posturing; they are expressions of who we are and how we must live and work in order to remain whole (Palmer, 1998). In other words, we are called to research and teach certain subjects in certain ways because doing so allows us to express some important part of our own identity. Who we are as people, at given points in time, requires that we choose certain research topics and approaches, and forgo others, or to teach certain classes in certain ways. Because to choose in contradiction to who we are, causes us to lose integrity and heart for what we do. We then can become alienated from our professional community, or worse yet, estranged from ourselves (Palmer, 1998).

We also can sustain ourselves by maintaining a dynamic interplay between the inner work we do, and the outer work we do in the field (Krone, 2001). By inner work I mean staying grounded, mindful, and aware of what is true for us. This can include maintaining

mind–body awareness through physical exercise, for our bodies often will know and tell us what is true, or just remaining still long enough to reflect on what is true. For me this takes the forms of jogging, hiking when I can get myself to the mountains, or more recently the practice of insight meditation. You can find what works best for you. A variety of practices can be helpful in strengthening our inner selves so they can better guide our outer work.

Doing so will help sustain us personally and professionally, and increase the likelihood that our work will be "good." According to Schumacher (1979), work becomes good when it: (1) provides necessary and useful products and services, (2) enables us to use our unique talents and gifts, and (3) is done in cooperation with others so as to free us from a tendency toward egocentricity. Engaging in good work is self-sustaining because it also is life giving. Given our past and more recent trends, organizational communication research clearly has the capacity and much potential to be "good."

Recent trends in organizational communication research suggest a very bright future indeed, especially if we continue to develop as a pluralistic community of scholars and, through our work, engage in local, national, and global conversations of practical importance. All indications are that, even though nearly 30 years have passed, the spirit of Charles Redding's call for more boat-rocking and whistle-blowing lives on in our desire to improve the quality of work life and to construct more socially just organizational arrangements. There is much more work to be done. Finish up those dissertations and join us in the eternal conversation. Gather with us in the ongoing conversation centered on the great and graceful subject we call organizational communication. The appendix to this paper provides a small collection of organizational communication readings that I think would make provocative starting points around which we might pause to remember the roots of our discipline, and to imagine collectively a range of new possibilities.

Author Biography

Kathy Krone is at the Department of Communication Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska. This paper was the keynote address delivered at the 16th annual Organizational Communication mini-conference, Western Michigan University, October 3–5, 2003.

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Appendix: Conversational Starting Points

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