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## Forum Introduction: Organizational Communication Scholars as Public Intellectuals

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## Forum Introduction

# Organizational Communication Scholars as Public Intellectuals

Kathleen J. Krone and Lynn M. Harter

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Grant an idea or belief to be true. What concrete difference will its being true make in any one's actual life? The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events.

James, 1907/1991, pp. 88–89

We remain optimistic when we read, write, ask, and answer questions. When a journal comes across our desks, we select an article or two to peruse and hope the arguments will transform how we see things. We hope the work will inspire us, offer new ways of thinking about a salient issue or question, and foster edifying dialogue about lived problems. In short, we muse, how does this scholarship enable stakeholders to understand, feel, and grapple with the experiences being expressed? What does the research awaken or evoke in those who consume it? What paths does the scholarship carve? What possibilities are envisioned? Meanwhile, as scholars, we seek to theorize in ways that move people to meaningful reflections and actions. Rather than divorcing ourselves from the community at large, we strive to move beyond the academy and connect the stories of our discipline with the stories of people's lives. This forum is inspired by a desire to understand (and model) how scholarship can weave its way more fully through and into the storied lives of others. Calls abound for civic or publicly responsible scholarship that speaks to the central and specific issues of communities (e.g., Denzin, 1997). In fact, *Prospect* magazine annually identifies their top 100 *public intellectuals*, people who have shown distinction in their own discipline along with the ability to communicate ideas and foster dialogue outside of it

(Herman, 2005). In this forum, we want to highlight the various ways in which organizational and management communication scholars understand and perform their roles as public intellectuals. Communication scholars draw on a variety of theoretical resources as they serve on nonprofit boards of directors (see Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw, 2005) and work-family commissions (see Buzzanell & Liu, 2005), and even as they write articles for trade magazines or share their work in popular press outlets (see Tracy, 2003; Wilkens, 2006). In some cases, communication scholars are intimately involved in the coproduction of communicative interventions (see Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006), and in other cases communication scholars are invited to assess the viability of social change initiatives or programs (see Miller, Geist Martin, & Cannon Beatty, 2005; Waldron & Lavitt, 2000).

In the following articles, several organizational communication scholars reflect on how they envision themselves and their work as public intellectuals. Although each essay makes a distinctive contribution to how we might understand the work of a public intellectual, as we reflected on the essays as a whole several common images also came to mind. First, we see a communication-centered public intellectual as *one who interrupts*. By *interrupt*, we mean making explicit and then disturbing habitual communication practices to meaningfully address a range of significant social problems (Cheney). For this group of scholars, interrupting has meant creating public space where scientists and nonscientists might practice interacting about controversial science in less stereotypic ways (Weaver), addressing the traditional social isolation of retirees by developing a "lifelong learning academy" (Waldron), storying alternative performances of disability (Harter, Norander, and Quinlan), and serving as consultants and on boards of directors for nongovernmental organizations working for social change (Papa and Singhal). As several contributors point out, interrupting habitual practice involves risk not just because doing so threatens to destabilize comfortable, if restrictive, identities and social relations but also because doing this sort of public intellectual work can take a great deal of time (Waldron) and is sometimes devalued by the discipline or by the academy more broadly (Cheney).

As we reflected on these essays, an image of a public intellectual as one who understands and works well with a sense of place also came to mind. This is reflected in the contributors' ability to identify and work with pressing social problems critical to a specific geographic location that are consequential on a larger scale as well, often crossing cultural and national boundaries. This group of scholars describes projects that spring directly from issues of great concern to their local communities. The decision to study communication and change in an agricultural cooperative support organization while living and working in Nebraska (Harter) or deciding to address the problem of social isolation among retirees while living and working in a community well known for attracting retirees (Waldron) reflects an eye for the importance of place and the willingness and ability to be responsive to the social and communicative needs of a particular place. Similarly, Weaver and her colleagues were commissioned specifically by the New Zealand Ministry of Research, Science, and Technology to develop public dialogue between scientist and nonscientist citizens around the science of human biotechnology in New Zealand. Although they are clearly responding to the needs of this particular place, what they learn from this experience is relevant to communities and governments around the world. Papa and Singhal

physically move between regions, and even continents, in their efforts to organize development initiatives using entertainment-education strategies. Working well with the social problems of a particular place can contribute in obvious and not-so-obvious ways to working well with similar social problems in other geographic places.

Third, in contrast to the more traditional image of a public intellectual as a single individual sharing technical expertise with less well-informed publics, communication-centered public intellectuals seem to understand themselves as working in partnership with colleagues as well as with the publics they seek to serve. This is evident in Kay Weaver's description of her collaboration with colleagues Juliet Roper and Ted Zorn as they worked to create a space as public intellectuals, which involved listening to citizens and scientists while working toward developing different understandings of themselves and others. It also is evident in Singhal's search for ways to make a stronger emotional connection while giving a public talk about a culturally sensitive matter. Vince Waldron even uses the metaphor of relational practice as a way to characterize his work as a public intellectual, reflecting on the quality of each partnership formed and the extent to which each led to a lasting and satisfying contribution. Several essays also reveal faculty collaborating with students in community-based initiatives (Harter, Norander, and Quinlan; Singhal and Papa; Waldron). Across essays, we see faculty and students alike who enter into dialogic relations with community partners, sometimes serving as catalysts, coaches, facilitators, and fellow learners, and who willingly experience the vulnerability associated with those relationships. In addition, we see senior colleagues working in partnership with each other creating space to reflect on the vulnerability they sometimes experience simply by being "intellectual" in certain publics (Weaver) or when projects become unpredictable or do not work out as planned (Singhal and Papa; Waldron).

For this group of scholars, public intellectual work seems to be more an expression of something important about themselves and a particular vision for what the discipline of communication studies could be rather than just one more thing that they do in an already busy life. For some, the work is a way to blend teaching, research, and service (Cheney). For others, the desire to engage with various publics to effect social change is more rooted in profound life experiences (Harter, Norander, and Quinlan). For all of our contributors, their work as public intellectuals seems guided by a set of values and principles that continues to call each to teach, to serve, and to research in ways that go beyond the formal boundaries of institutionalized higher education—whatever the risks. We are inspired by their imaginative efforts to enlarge possibilities and foster social change, and we hope that you will be, too.

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