

An Introduction to Communication and Public Policy

Eric E. Peterson

(peterson@maine.edu)

The 21st meeting of the International Colloquium on Communication, held on July 27 – August 1, 2008, focused on the theme of communication and public policy. Laura Lindenfeld, Kristin Langellier and I, as conference organizers, developed this theme to explore the ongoing conversation about the relationship between public policy and communication studies that ranges across a wide variety of issues: for example, what role(s) does communication scholarship have in the analysis and implementation of public policy? How might engagement with public policy offer new opportunities to communication studies scholarship? How important is it to bring communication scholarship to discourse on public policy? The participants of this colloquium take up these and other related questions as a way of joining this ongoing conversation about public policy.

Communication figures in public policy in a variety of complex ways. Communication is one site where policy is publicly worked over, often in hearings and debates, in the editorial pages of newspapers and magazines, on radio and television talk shows, and on political weblogs and social networking sites. Communication is the subject of public policy, most notably in laws and regulations on forms of speech, mass media, and telecommunication. Communication is the object of policy, as witnessed in the efforts by government and non-government agencies to inform and educate various publics about problems in society. And, communication is an academic discipline that studies public policy. These varied relations between communication and public policy offer numerous possibilities for scholars, practitioners, and activists.

The emphasis on the importance of communication to public policy is not new nor is it unique. For example, Iris Marion Young (2000), in her book on *Inclusion and Democracy*, emphasizes that inclusive political communication is key to the legitimacy and success of democracy. She argues:

Law and policy are democratically legitimate to the extent that they address problems identified

through broad public discussion with remedies that respond to reasonably reflective and undominated public opinion. The associational activity of civil society functions to identify problems, interests, and needs in the society; public spheres take up these problems, communicate them to others, give them urgency, and put pressures on state institutions to institute measures to address them. (p. 177)

Young concludes that:

Public organizing and engagement, then, can be thought of as processes by which the society communicates to itself about its needs, problems, and creative ideas for how to solve them. The democratic legitimacy of public policy, moreover, depends partly on the state institutions being sensitive to that communication process. The moral force of the processes of public communication and its relations to policy, then, rests in part on a requirement that such communication be both inclusive and critically self-conscious. (p. 179)

Communication, from such a perspective, is not merely the site, subject, or object of public policy. Rather, communication is essential, in the phenomenological sense, to public policy in a democracy.

The following essays from the colloquium explore the ways in which attention to communication can enrich public policy and, conversely, how attention to public policy can enrich the lived world and our ecology of communication. The essays are grouped into three sections: communication education, communication analysis, and language and media issues. In the first section on education, Hellmut Geissner – a co-founder of the Colloquium forty years ago – describes his ongoing work with the Institute for Rhetoric and Methodology in Political Education. The IRM is an adult education effort that emphasizes the importance of communication as a way to manage and foster democracy. In the second essay, Tim Hegstrom

describes a similar effort in the U.S. to use group discussion as a way to foster participative democracy and citizenship training. Roland Wagner, in the third essay, focuses on specific forms of communication education used with politicians from Heidelberg. He outlines the specific demands that politicians make on educators and suggests a variety of ways that communication education is a valuable resource for them. In the final essay in this section, Gary Selnow describes how video and Internet-based technologies can be used to extend medical education, especially in dispersed geographic regions and in hostile environments such as Iraq and Kosovo.

The authors in the second group of essays employ different forms of communication analysis to explore particular public policy issues. Elizabeth Fine conducts a metaphor analysis to unpack how a U.S. Congressman from Virginia uses language to frame the discussion and representation of supposedly “clean” coal technology. Etsuko Kinefuchi takes up the challenge of how communication can work to develop public policy focused on ethnic and racial diversity in Greensboro, North Carolina. Donal Carbaugh analyzes the gap between how service agencies approach local communities and how those same communities conceptualize their situation. He identifies three areas that contribute to this gap: differences in the concepts and symbols people use to think and speak, differences in what is thought of as good conduct and practical action, and differences in designing cooperative action. In the final essay of the section, Werner Nothdurft argues that how we conceptualize people and social interaction makes a difference for how we conceptualize and practice public policy.

The third group of essays focus on the importance of language and media in public policy. Edith Slembek describes the process of training speakers to give brief testimonials for a television program broadcast in Switzerland. Slembek examines the case of three speakers to suggest the impact of the program. Edward Sewell explores three approaches to language policy – assimilation, bilingualism, and confederation – and the conflicts that result from these policies especially in a context of globalization. Shane Perry, in a case study of a National Geographic documentary, examines how media production practices both engage and frame international events for domestic audiences. In the final essay, Imke Schessler-Jandreau considers U.S. government policies on health and weight loss. These policies adopt a form of medical discourse that frame obesity as an individual problem in need of “therapy” or “treatment.”

Three other presentations from the colloquium are not included in this volume because they are published elsewhere: they are authored by Kristin M. Langellier (2010), Laura Lindenfeld and Gisela Hoecherl-Alden (2008), and Nathan Stormer (2008). Kevin Carragee, recently publishing in the area of policy and communication activism (Frey & Carragee, 2007), responded to the presentations.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that organizing and hosting the colloquium was a collaborative effort. Kristin Langellier, Laura Lindenfeld, and I met and planned. We selected the Schoodic Education and Research Center for the site of the colloquium. Located just past the town of Winter Harbor on the Schoodic peninsula, the Center provided a welcoming gathering place where the colloquium participants could enjoy the natural beauty of the Maine coast in summer, the fellowship of international colleagues, and the stimulation of scholarly dialogue. Shelly Chase developed the colloquium website and travel support materials. Shane Perry and Imke Schessler-Jandreau helped out with local arrangements and with transportation for colloquium participants. Bernd Schwandt, coordinator of the previous colloquium meeting in Erfurt, Germany, provided much informal assistance and suggestions on working internationally. And, Betty Fine, with the assistance of Gail McMillan at Virginia Tech, was a key figure in helping me prepare this volume and in making the move to the digital publication of the proceedings.

Our collaborative efforts were greatly aided by the institutional and financial support of the University of Maine; in particular, by the Department of Communication and Journalism, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, and the Mark and Marcia Bailey Professorship. Additional support was provided by the Margaret Chase Smith Library.

References

- FREY, L. R., & CARRAGEE, K. M. (EDS.). 2007. *Communication activism: Communication for social change* (vol. 1), *Media and performance activism* (vol. 2). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- LANGELLIER, K. M. 2010. Performing Somali identity in the diaspora: “Wherever I go I know who I am.” *Cultural Studies*. [in press]
- LINDENFELD, L., & HOECHERL-ALDEN, G. 2008. The role of language education in Maine’s global economy. *Maine Policy Review*, 17(1), 54-67.

STORMER, N. 2008. Looking in wonder: Prenatal sublimity and the commonplace "Life." *Signs*, 33, 647 – 673.

YOUNG, I. M. 2000. *Inclusion and democracy*. Oxford University Press.

International Colloquium on Communication

Founded by Hellmut K. Geissner and Fred L. Casmir on behalf of the
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sprachwissenschaft und Sprecherziehung and the
National Communication Association (formerly Speech Communication Association)

1968 Heidelberg	Germany/USA	The Systems of Higher Education in the USA and Germany
1970 Hattingen	Germany	The Role of Speech at Universities in the USA and Germany
1972 Walberberg	Germany	Ethical Goals in Speech Education Curricula in the USA and Germany
1974 Marburg	Germany	The Development of Rhetorics in the USA and Germany
1976 Tampa, Florida	USA	Intercultural Communication
1978 Hernstein bei Wien	Austria	The Rhetoric of Minorities
1980 Lincoln, Nebraska	USA	Rhetorical Analysis and Criticism
1982 Kopenhagen	Denmark	Rhetoricity of Literature and Literarity of Rhetorics
1984 Tempe, Arizona	USA	Performance: Theories, Methods, Models
1986 Landau	Germany	On Narratives
1988 Blacksburg, Virginia	USA	Perspectives on Science, Technology, and Culture
1990 Lausanne	Switzerland	Communication and Culture
1992 Alexandria, Virginia	USA	Ethnorhetoric and Ethnohermeneutics
1994 Jyväskylä	Finland	Critical Perspectives on Communication Research and Pedagogy
1996 San Francisco, Calif.	USA	The Changing Public Sphere: Issues for Communication Education and Research
1998 Budapest	Hungary	The Voice of the Voiceless
2000 Boston, Mass.	USA	The Voice of Power
2002 Berlin	Germany	Communication and Political Change
2004 San José, Calif.	USA	Communication and Conflict
2006 Erfurt	Germany	Applied Communication in Organizational and International Contexts
2008 Schoodic Point, Maine	USA	Communication and Public Policy