

# An Introduction to Communicator Opportunities and Responsibilities in Volatile Times

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The 23<sup>rd</sup> International Colloquium on Communication (ICC) was held on July 29 – August 3, 2012, in San Francisco, California. The conference theme focused on the interwoven opportunities and responsibilities of communicators in a time of global volatility. As the call for papers noted: “financial hazards, climate change, political uprising in the Middle East and elsewhere, privacy threats, shifting balances of power worldwide, are just a few of the global issues that challenge contemporary societies.” Given the volatility of these times, it is important to ask about the responsibilities and opportunities of communicators. The use of the term “communicators” is understood to encompass a broad range of agents ranging from individual scholars and educators to academic institutions, media organizations, corporations, and governments. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Colloquium was organized by Gary Selnow (U.S. Coordinator) and Annette Mönnich (European Coordinator) with local arrangements by Gary Selnow.

The concern with communicator opportunities and responsibilities grew out of the previous ICC, held in Vienna, Austria, in July 2010. That colloquium focused on how new and evolving media forms were changing society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Elizabeth Fine and Gary Selnow, the editors of the 2010 Proceedings, point out, society was transformed by the introduction of radio, television, and the internet over the past 100 years. Whereas the 22<sup>nd</sup> Colloquium focused on the social consequences of these emerging media forms, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Colloquium shifts focus to explore the particular responsibilities and opportunities that communicators face in such turbulent times.

In taking up the issue of communicator responsibility in volatile times, Colloquium participants follow the path marked out by

Hellmut Geissner, a founder and guiding light of the Colloquium for more than forty years of its history. In his key contribution to the proceedings of the 14<sup>th</sup> Colloquium, Geissner (1995) claims that responsibility is not an optional or accidental aspect of communication. Instead, Geissner argues that responsibility is an essential component of human communication. As he concludes, “there is no human perspective other than dialogical ethics that is founded on conversation and responsibility” (20). To reach this conclusion, Geissner traces the meanings of responsibility from their English and German uses to their Latin and Greek roots. The root word “respond” in the English term “responsibility” is not merely the simple reciprocity of “saying something in return” but is the more profound reciprocity of communicative accountability understood as “*the mutual willingness to promise in return*” (18; emphasis in the original). Communication entails both the ability to respond (*response-ability*) and the mutual accountability for that interaction (*response-ability*).

The parallel German word “Verantwortung” suggests a similar ambiguity. Geissner points out that the word “Verantwortung” combines the noun “Antwort,” which incorporates the meanings of “answer” and “answer-ability,” along with a reference to the expected or finished action as captured by the prefix “*ver-*.” A communicator’s responsibility is thus to both answer to and to be accountable for one’s own speech and to the other’s answer (18). In this way, the dialogical character of communication and responsibility is brought forth. As Geissner summarizes: “the ability to converse (“*Gesprächsfähigkeit*”) is the essence of human beings interconnected with the ability to be responsible (“*Verantwortungsfähigkeit*”) (19).

The contributions in the Proceedings of the 23<sup>rd</sup> International Colloquium on Communication illustrate the complexity of this dialogic understanding of responsibility: that is, to render an account of society in volatile times and to be accountable for that account to both society and to ourselves as participants in an ongoing dialogue. The essays in this volume have been organized to crystalize three aspects of a dialogic approach to responsibility. The first section, "Contemporary Institutional and Social Struggles," focuses on responsibility in the sense of providing an account of society in volatile times. The second section, "Opportunity and Responsibility in Journalism," focuses on responsibility in the sense of accountability or "answerability" in our own communication practice such as the production and reception of journalism. The third section, "Cultural Challenges in Volatile Times," focuses on responsibility in the sense of accountability for and to the other in the dialogic practices of representation, mis/understanding, and listening.

Two essays comprise the first section on "Contemporary Institutional and Social Struggles." Elizabeth Fine analyzes the use of the trickster archetype in contemporary Anonymous and Occupy social movements. These social movements enable ordinary people to "turn a trick" on oppressive forces of corporations and corrupt politicians. Fine draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to draw out the ambiguous complexities that accompany the infusion of the carnivalesque into protest strategies and tactics. The turns and re-turns of the trickster create opportunities for activists at the same time that they raise new questions about the responsibility of such efforts. Whereas Fine analyzes the communication of the marginalized, Timothy Hegstrom shifts critical attention to the work of economists within the mainstream of policy discussion. In particular, he describes how these established economists "actively forget" principles of fiscal policy, and the impact that such organizational forgetting had during the Great Recession that began in 2008. Hegstrom points out that "active forgetting" is a selective and strategic operation wherein some practices are reproduced while others are resisted or repressed. In this case, the policy recommendations of mainstream economists constitute a clear conflict of interest when their personal financial ties are not made explicit or challenged. Both essays in this section illustrate how "giving an account" (Butler)

of social phenomena is not merely a positing of "what exists" but also a complex and ambiguous description of both text and context.

The two essays in the second section, "Opportunity and Responsibility in Journalism," focus on the possibility of self-reflexive critique in production and reception. Eberhard Wolf-Lincke explores how television journalists incorporate critique into their production practices. Little research exists on how broadcast journalists practice what is commonly understood as a goal of "journalistic excellence." Wolf-Lincke carefully analyzes the organizational practices of a specific broadcast organization to review how journalistic practices can both enact and frustrate the pursuit of such excellence. His empirical analysis suggests the importance of critique for responsible professional practice. The second essay in this section, by Eric Peterson and Kristin Langellier, focuses on the reception of journalism by newspaper readers. They examine how online comments made by readers on a local newspaper website can contribute to responsible dialogue in reception. Following the work of Roger Silverstone on ethics in the mediated public sphere, they use a specific case study regarding the deportation of a local Somali resident in Lewiston, Maine, to illustrate three moral obligations: proper distance, responsible listening, and truthfulness.

The final section, "Cultural Challenges in Volatile Times," explores the responsibilities to and for the other that communicators take up in different forms of dialogue. Franziska Krumwiede analyzes media representations of the figure of "the Gypsy." She situates her analysis in the context of the opening in 2012 of a Berlin memorial to the Sinti and Roma persecuted during the Third Reich. Krumwiede examines the operation of pejorative terms (such as "Zigeuner") on cultural identity as taken up in legal courts and academic discourse. She traces the emergence of Gypsy stereotypes from the Middle Ages to contemporary popular culture. In the second essay of the section, Carmen Spiegel discusses the operation of understanding and misunderstanding in intercultural communication. Her emphasis on communication as interaction suggests that scholars attend to misunderstanding as more than a failure to understand. She connects this emphasis on interaction to specific discourse strategies that have implications for how

practitioners approach communication training. In the last essay, Richard Halley outlines the meanings of listening across a wide range of contexts. He argues that these examples demonstrate both the importance of listening and of “being listened to.” Listening, he reminds us, is not merely the reception of information but also a concern for respecting and honoring the other’s discourse. In this way, Halley returns us to Geissner’s argument about responsibility. To listen to these authors is to participate in their promise of accountability and in the reciprocity of communication. Indeed, the contributions to this volume – and the history of the International Colloquium on Communication in general – illustrates the operation of communication in Geissner’s sense as “*the mutual willingness to promise in return.*”

## References

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