

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because Information Without Meaning Lacks Purpose

*By Paaige K. Turner, Ph.D., Executive Director, National Communication Association
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At the March for Science in Washington, DC, where I participated on behalf of the [National Communication Association](#), I held a sign that said, “Care about people? Care about Social Science!” As fellow marchers spotted me from a distance, they would weave through the crowds, maneuvering around lab coats, signs with chemical and mathematical formulas, and flyers describing climate change. When they drew near, their faces would break into smiles and they would proclaim, “I’m a social scientist, too! Can I take a picture with you and post it?” In that moment, they found meaning for participating in the March of Science; it gave them purpose.

Each day we search for purpose as we create and consume symbols, messages, and meanings through our conversations with friends, families, and coworkers, and through information disseminated by retailers, healthcare providers, government agencies, and the media. In the past, we searched for information; today, we navigate a deluge of communications as we seek support to care for an aging parent, make choices about our own healthcare, weigh public policy, contribute to the organizations for which we work, and value the diversity of the people around us. Over the course of our lives, we develop scripts for how to communicate and schemes for predicting the likely outcomes. Yet, we often walk away from a conversation, email, meeting, election, scientific report, or newscast asking ourselves, “What does this mean?”

As an intellectual and scientific discipline, Communication studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry. Communication scholars engage in rigorous and systematic inquiry to provide insight into the practices by which our lives are given meaning and the skills we need to determine whether those meanings reflect a world in which we wish to live. The National Communication Association supports the research of more than 7,000 scholars, teachers, and practitioners who challenge taken-for-granted assumptions regarding why and how humans communicate as individuals, groups, organizations, and nations to ensure that the meanings we create and the consequences of those choices are substantiated through the modes and methods of scientific inquiry. Here are just a few examples to put our work into perspective:

- ◇ **Increased Compliance with Medical Guidelines.** Health risk communicators face significant challenges in disseminating evidence-based information to the public. Communication scholars have established that



including motivations, reasons, and potential outcomes as well as attending to cultural and identity factors can increase [positive health behaviors](#).

- ◇ **Evaluating Media Messages.** In an age of increasing mistrust of mainstream media and the rise of scams, spoofs, and inaccurate information spread through social media and unreliable news sources, our scholars are at the forefront of the search for truth and accuracy by engaging in investigations into the use of [manipulative advertising](#) to promote drug and alcohol use, bias in news articles, and how social media dissemination patterns amplify a single message to appear as if it is coming from multiple independent sources.
- ◇ **Ensuring Informed Public Policy.** Just recently, NCA member Danielle Endres presented at the annual Coalition for National Science Funding exhibition on the efficacy of direct communication between scientists and energy policy makers vs. mediated communication through publics. Her research, and that of many other Communication scholars around the country, plays a vital role in providing evidence-based data to lawmakers making decisions about everything from the environment and health care to arts and technology.
- ◇ **Framing and Communicating Scientific Knowledge.** Scholars and scientists make communicative choices that frame and define their research and findings. Communication scholars help elucidate those choices so that we can make informed choices about the information produced. Kelly Clancy and Benjamin Clancy of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill say that [GMO proponents](#) tend to employ “scientific narratives in conjunction with rhetoric that renders GMOs ‘invisible.’” At the March for Science, the thousands of participants in DC and around the world represented many types of science: physical, social, health, and more. But a common thread is that they all understood that the “[rhetoric of science](#)” plays a key role in defending the sciences, and in effectively communicating their individual area of research and its impact on the public.

We live in a world that is filled with information that can improve our lives, but without a context for understanding its relevance, the time and dollars spent developing that information are wasted. Communication scholars partner with physical and social scientists across a wide array of disciplines such as engineering, computer science, public health, medicine, biology, chemistry, social work, psychology, and political science to place information into context. Why social science? **Because when we communicate we create meaning, when we create meaning we find purpose, and when we find purpose we create the world in which we wish to live.**



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