

Mass Communication in Rhetorical History

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A workshop co-sponsored by RSA and the American Society for the History of Rhetoric

Historically speaking, the term “mass communication” entered our critical lexicon at the same moment that the study of rhetoric was being reinvigorated by the formation of Speech departments: the 1920s. Geographically speaking, one of the most influential of these early Speech departments—the Department of Speech and Drama at Cornell University—was separated from the birth of “mass communication” by only 224 miles: the distance from Ithaca, NY to the New York City offices of the Radio Corporation of America, where one David Sarnoff fatefully coined the term.

Yet, despite the chronological and geographical propinquity of mass communication and rhetoric, the 224 miles may as well have been an impenetrable wall. For in the course of the twentieth century, the two disciplines have crossed paths only occasionally. To this day, they remain separated institutionally (housed in different departments) and intellectually (claiming different histories, telling different stories).

In this workshop we integrate the intellectual histories of mass communication with those of rhetorical studies. We seek out places, persons, and topics of overlap, and ask how the two disciplines might be profitably interwoven. Our conversations will be focused on such *topoi* as masses, crowds, publics, transportation systems and thinkers like Josiah Ober, Edward Bernays, Walter Lippman, John Dewey, Robert Merton, Paul Lazarsfeld, Herta Herzog, and the Frankfurt School.

Following Peter Simonson’s recent *Refiguring Mass Communication*, we understand “mass communication” in the broadest possible sense: in addition to broadcast media such as television and radio, we also include crowds, strikes, parades, pilgrimages, and forms of mass transport (trains, subways, etc.) as examples of mass communication—all of these, historically speaking, inform our understanding of mass communication.

The workshop is comprised of four three-hour sessions. Each session will be one part “workshop” (i.e., working with papers-in-progress prepared in advance by participants) and one part “seminar” (i.e., talking about common *topoi* and texts read in advance).